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by Robert Turner

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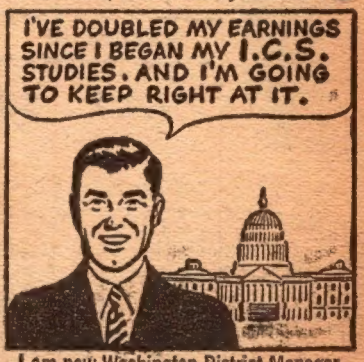

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DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

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The Real West

A DEPARTMENT FOR WESTERN FANS

By Harold Gluck

AN INDIAN CHIEF SPEAKS

MY NAME in my Indian tongue is *Ma-ka-tai-me-she-kia-kiak* and it is not hard to pronounce for those familiar with the Sac language. Perhaps you know me by my name in English, which is Black Hawk. These words which I tell you were dictated by me in my native tongue to Antoine Leclair, United States Interpreter for the Sacs and Foxes at the Indian Agency of Rock Island.

I was born at the Sac Village on Rock River, in what is now known as your great state of Wisconsin. Nothing important happened to me as a youth until about my fifteenth year. I was not allowed to paint myself nor wear feathers; however in a battle I managed to wound an enemy and was placed in the ranks of the Braves.

A leading chief of the Mucow nation came to our village for recruits to war against the Osages, our common enemy. My father joined, and I also volunteered my services. In a battle I had the opportunity to prove to my father that I was not an unworthy son but had courage and bravery. Standing by my father's side, I saw him kill an enemy and tear the scalp from his head. Fired with ambition, I rushed furiously at an Osage and crushed him to the earth with my tomahawk; then I ran my lance through his body, and took off his scalp, which I brought to my father. My father said nothing but it was easy to see he looked pleased, for this was the first man I had ever killed.

Our enemy's loss in this battle was great and they retreated, which put an end to the war for the present, our party then returned to our village and we danced over the scalps we had taken. This was the first time I was permitted to join in a scalp-dance.

After a few moons had passed I led a party of seven and attacked one hundred Osages! I killed one man and left him for my comrades to scalp. I then took an observation of the strength and preparations of the enemy. Finding they were well-armed, I ordered a retreat and came home without losing a single brave! This battle helped me to gain fame among my people.

As a result of being known as a brave warrior, I was able to raise a party of one hundred and eighty to go against the Osages. We left our village in high spirits; we would return with many scalps. We marched

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over rugged country until we found the trail of our enemy. We came to their village which we approached with great caution. We wanted to surprise them. But to our sorrow, we found they had deserted the place. My men became dissatisfied; no scalps! So, with the exception of five, they all returned home. I placed myself at the head of the little band, and I gave thanks to the Great Spirit for these brave men. We took up the trail of our enemy and finally killed one man and a boy. We at least returned home with two scalps.

However, from time to time, the Osages would raid our village. When I became nineteen, I was able to recruit a band of two hundred efficient warriors. Onwards we went into the territory of the Osages until we met a force of about equal strength. A terrible battle took place; you must remember that my braves were fatigued as a result of the long march.

EACH PARTY fought desperately. The enemy seemed unwilling to yield ground and we were determined to conquer or die. A large number of the Osages were killed, and many wounded before they commenced retreating. In this engagement I killed five men and one squaw and had the good fortune to take the scalps of all I killed except one. The enemy's loss in this engagement was about one hundred men; our loss was nineteen. We returned to our village well-pleased with our success, and we danced over the scalps we had taken.

As a result of their terrible loss in this battle, the Osages became content to remain on their own lands and leave us alone. Our attention then became directed towards an ancient enemy—one who had murdered some of our helpless women and children; we were determined to punish the Cherokees. I started against them with my father and a small party.

Early in the battle, and they had the greater number, my father was wounded in the thigh—but he had the pleasure of killing his enemy before he fell. Seeing my father falling to the ground, I at once assumed command and fought desperately. Finally the enemy had to retreat. I went to my father's side to help him. Our medicine man said the wound was mortal and my father would die. Alas, my father soon died and you see the medicine man was right. In this battle I killed three men and wounded several; the enemy's loss was twenty-eight and ours was but seven.

I buried our dead and returned with my party; we were all sad. I blackened my face and then fasted and prayed to the Great Spirit for five years. During this time I also went hunting and fishing. However, the Osages again went on the warpath against my people. I took a small party and went against the enemy, but could only find six men; their forces being so weak, I thought it cowardly to kill them. So I then returned to my village.

However I decided to exterminate the Osages for the injuries they had inflicted upon us. So, immediately upon my return I started to recruit a strong force. In the third moon, I went on the warpath with a force consisting of five hundred Sacs and Foxes and one hundred Ioways. We continued our march for several days before we came upon their trail. We camped for the night and then made an early start the next morning. We attacked forty lodges and killed all their inhabitants except two squaws whom I captured and made prisoners. During this attack I killed seven men and two boys with my own hand; in this battle the bravest warriors among the Osages were killed. So they had to cease their aggressions upon our hunting grounds and remain on their own lands.

The loss of my father by the Cherokees made me anxious to avenge his death; if possible I wanted to kill all of them. I accordingly commenced to recruit another party to go against them. We went into their country but could only find five of their people whom I took prisoners. I afterwards

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"I shot Val in both legs, so he couldn't follow me — I didn't realize he'd be crippled."

WELCOME BACK, BUSHWHACKER!

Feature Novel of Overdue Justice

BY ROBERT TURNER

WHEN ZANDER got off the through stage from Tucson that morning, he looked bad, looked dog-sick and weak and whipped. He felt worse than he looked. The long, hot stage ride, without rest, without food, had weakened him to the breaking point. Zander knew now that he was a fool; he should have waited a few months to come back here to Sage City to do what he had to do, should have built up his strength. He had been told that; had known it within himself, really. But Zander had never been one to take advice, nor to follow his own deeper-rooted, wiser instincts; eight years hadn't changed that in him.

He stood on the plank walk in front of the Express office, swaying some in the broiling morning sun. He squinted through the dust-clouds after the stage, thundering on down Main Street, and wished he were still on it. He should have gone on to the next stop; he shouldn't be here—not here, back in Sage City again, in his condition.

The dust settled and he looked down the broad, hoof-packed earth of Main Street, nostalgia twisting in

For eight long years, Zander had lived with one thought: vengeance on the man who'd framed him into prison. Now, Zander was back, ready to settle accounts with his treacherous ex-partner — only to find Duchaine a helpless cripple, unable to fight . . .

him at recognition of the old, familiar, false-fronted buildings that hadn't changed. Zander's eyes swept past the Palace hotel. A couple of blinds were crinkled back, and he knew that curious eyes or early-risers were studying him. It didn't bother him; nobody would recognize him right off.

When Kris Zander had gone away he'd been a big man, beefy-big. He was still large-framed, but there wasn't much flesh on him; he was all bones and stringy sinew. His face was like a skull's, gray eyes sunken deep into the sockets, cheekbones standing out, stretching the skin over them to the breaking point. You could almost see his teeth through his tightly-drawn lips.

When he'd left Sage City, Zander had been a dresser, a man duded-up to the eyebrows, an hombre who favored black. His hand-tailored black shirts, snug black whipcord breetches and expensive black boots—so shiny-glittering you could see yourself in them—were his trademark. His hats were always flat-crowned black Stetsons with rawhide chin-thongs. The silver hip-slung guns he always wore would catch the sun like glinting jewels.

Today, eight years later, Zander's stooped, wolf-gaunt figure was draped in stiff-dirty blue denim, three sizes too large. His recently shaved head, covered only with a five-day blond stubble, was bared to the sun. He wore no guns, no boots; the big clumsy things on his feet were scuffed and cracked cheap leatherwork shoes.

The sun beat down on him and Zander felt his head go light, his stomach turning. Main Street tilted before his eyes; he half fell against a hitching rail and hung over it. The nausea and dizziness cleared in a moment, leaving only the weakness once again. *A little food,* he thought, *a couple of hookers of rotgut and the weakness, too, will be gone. I'll be all right, then; I'll be able to handle Duchaine.*

He couldn't get the food, because Sage City's only hash house wasn't open this early, but he'd get the rotgut. He'd get it in Duchaine's own place, the *Black Deuce,* after a little trouble.

WHEN ZANDER pushed through the batwings, he found the place deserted, tables and chairs stacked. The saloon was not fully aired out yet, was still rank with the stench of last night's whisky, stale smoke, cheap perfume and all the sweating that had been done over the gaming tables. A skinny, wall-eyed little swamper with loving-cup ears, was swabbing down the floor with a rag-mop bigger than himself. He glanced briefly at Zander, said: "Ain't open for business yet," and went on with his work.

"This ain't business," Zander told him. "It's an emergency. If I don't get a drink, I'll keel over; I'm bad off."

"Well, keel, then," the swamper said, still not looking up.

Zander took a good grip on both those big ears and jerked the little man's head up. "I got nothing against you," he said. "I don't want to hurt you; don't make me do it. Get behind that bar and pour. My money's good."

The swamper took one all-over look at Zander and fear flashed across his eyes. He dropped the mop and garbled something which Zander didn't understand. Zander freed his ears and watched him shuffle behind the bar, reach for a bottle. Zander took the two last silver dollars from the pocket of his denims, plunked them on the hardwood. He gulped down two drinks as fast as he could swallow and prayed that they would stay with his empty stomach. He got some small satisfaction out of watching the

frightened swamper pour a third drink, on the house, and this he sipped slowly.

Slowly the liquor burned through him, stimulated, seemed to strengthen him and Zander stood straighter; a little brightness began to glisten in his eyes again.

"The Territorial Pen up to Yahoo, if I may venture a guess," the swamper mumbled, respectfully, studying Zander. "How long did you put in?"

Zander raised his brows. "Well, now," he said. "You're an observing cuss! How in Hell's hot water did you ever reckon that I was a con?"

The swamper looked pleased. He chuckled throatily. "It was easy. They put the mark on you up there—the hair-crop, the poor clothes, the mean and hungry desperate look that—" He stopped as suddenly as though somebody had batted him in the teeth with a gun-butt; he was looking into Zander's unsmiling eyes and realizing that Zander was making a fool of him. He looked relieved when Zander said:

"That's all right; I know what I look like. I know what they did to me. Sure they let me chuck the stripes but they left some on my back I'll always tote. They put 'em there with a wet and knotted rawhide whip that takes the hide off a man in strips. Then they pitch you nekkid into a salt pit and that doesn't help raw flesh much, either. They—"

"Very touching, Kris!" a deep and silky voice cut in. "Prison is a hard life; that's why most men stay honest. When an hombre bucks the law, is a menace to society, you wouldn't expect him to be coddled, would you?"

Zander wheeled around at the sound of that voice, like a spun top. His big bony fists balled at his sides; sudden tension strung him tight as a guide wire. He stared at the man who had spoken to him, his eyes blurring. He shook his head in agonized disbelief and fell back against the bar as though he'd been struck a physical blow.

"Duchaine!" The name came choking out of Zander's throat like an animal sound.

The man in the wheel chair before him was even bulkier across the shoulders and through the chest than Zander remembered. The massiveness of his head was emphasized by the leonine sweep of long, iron-gray hair back from the high, bony forehead. The clipped mustache, black as a thin streak of paint, curled along with Duchaine's overfull, sensual lips as he smiled. But there was no humor in his eyes; they were flat and long under jet black, finely winged brows, too widely set apart by a broken nose. Their steady, hard brightness was almost reptilian.

Duchaine's huge, gnarl-fingered hands left the arms of the wheel chair and smoothed the folds of blanket that covered him from the hips down—folds that were so obviously loose and unfilled that Zander, looking at them, knew there were no legs underneath.

"Disappointed, Kris?" Duchaine said so softly it was almost a whisper. "Don't be. I reckon I can arrange some kind of satisfaction for you; I understand how you feel."

RIGHT THEN, Kris Zander felt sick—a roaring, tearing sickness such as he'd never experienced before. The illness of suddenly impotent anger, frustration, the irrefutable bursting of a dream. For eight years,

Zander had put up with hell and torture, sustained by the knowledge that, when it was over, he would be able to purge himself of all that with his fists or his guns—or both. He had thought of nothing but the man who had betrayed him, who had caused him to be sent to the pen. He had dreamed over and over and over of his fists thudding into that man's face, of his hands gripping the man's thick throat—and later, of the way Duchaine would look facing Zander's guns—the way he would look with .44 slugs ripping into his barrel chest, the expression on Duchaine's face when he died. And now, looking at this legless man in the wheel chair, Zander knew that he was going to be denied these pleasures.

"How—how did you lose your—" Zander broke off, stammering. "What happened to your legs, Duchaine?"

Two spots of color stood out over Duchaine's cheekbones. The huge hands, that had once beaten Kris Zander to a pulp, clenched helplessly at the arms of the wheelchair. "Someone shot them up," he said, finally, through his teeth, not looking at Zander, staring into space, hard-eyed. "Someone who was too soft to kill me outright—or too cruel. Infection set in. The legs had to be hacked off. But don't let it bother you, Kris; it doesn't hamper me as much as you'd think."

Duchaine pushed the wheel chair over to the bar, reached up and grabbed the bottle the swamper had set out. He poured a drink into Zander's glass. "On me, Kris," he said, chuckling, drily. "For old time's sake." Then he twisted his powerful torso, hurled the still half-full bottle toward a back corner of the room. It crashed against the wall, showered whisky and shattered glass down over the man who was curled up asleep on a table back there where the dimness had hidden him from Zander.

The man came up off the table roaring mule-skinner's oaths, brushing bits of glass and trickles of whisky from his bushy thick red hair, his jowely face and wiry, matted, rust-colored beard.

"Easy, Jocko!" Duchaine called softly. "*I* threw that bottle. Now shut your vile mouth and come over here; I've got a job for you."

The redhead ambled toward them. He was half a head taller than Zander and a hundred pounds heavier. He was naked to the waist, except for a filthy workkerchief tied loosely under his chin. He was slope-shouldered and fat, the flesh hanging in thick folds about his waist. The only trouble was Zander saw right away, that the lard was but a surface-covering of heavily-layered muscle underneath. Here was a man, Zander recognized as powerful as a bull-buffalo—and probably as dangerous, when aroused.

"Kris," Duchaine said, "this is Jocko Quinn, my alter-ego in some ways. He does active musclework of which I'm incapable."

Quinn stood beside the wheel chair, grinning sheepishly, his little pig eyes almost squinched shut. There wasn't very much to Jocko Quinn's face. His nose was just a flattened button; his lips so thin, so short, that he had no mouth to speak of—just a minute opening in the lower part of his face. He smeared some of the whisky dripping down his cheek with a hand the size of a spade.

"The boss knows I'm hard to wake up," he told Zander. "He saves time doin' somethin' like that. It wakes me, pronto!... Who's this slatty-lookin' hombre, boss?"

DUCHAINE sighed. In the patient monotone of a man explaining something difficult to a child, he said: "His name's Kris Zander; he used to live here in Sage City, Jocko, before you came here. Kris and I were pard-

ners, friends. Then something—unavoidable—happened. Kris was convicted of shooting Tom Mackin, the town marshall, was sent to prison. He blames me for that, in some twisted way. Now, eight years later, he's come back to beat hell out of me—perhaps even kill me, I dunno. But I've spoiled that for him by being minus a couple of legs. What fun is he going to get out of fist-killing a helpless cripple? You see what he's up against, Jocko?"

Quinn's brow corrugated. He tugged at his wiry red beard, frowning. His brain was struggling with Duchaine's words, but didn't seem to be making any progress.

Zander said, feeling veins of temper standing out in his forehead: "You make it sound so simple, Val; you must've lost your memory along with your legs. Why don't you tell him about Lucia Mackin, too, Tom's sister? That *you* were really the one who drygulched Tom, framing evidence to make it look like me. You did that because you wanted Lucia—and knew you didn't have a chance so long as Tom or I were around. Why don't you tell him those things? It doesn't matter now who hears them."

Duchaine smirked. "Why don't you try to *make* me admit to those wild accusations of yours, Kris, the way you once did?"

That was the part that rankled most strongly, the main reason he'd come back to Sage City, to make up for that failure, if nothing else. The scene that Duchaine was talking about, flashed across his mind. Zander had escaped from the posse that had rounded him up for Tom Mackin's shooting, long enough to get to Duchaine and try to beat the truth out of him. Filled with the strength of righteous rage, desperate, he'd thought he could do that, even though Duchaine was bigger, heavier and known as a fast man with his fists.

He'd held his own for about twenty minutes; then Duchaine had kneed him. In that moment of painful helplessness, Duchaine had taken full advantage. When the posse had arrived they'd found Kris Zander a swollen, bloody hulk on the floor, unconscious. And that was the thing that got Zander the most—that Duchaine had licked him; that was the final hurt and humiliation. He had known that nothing could erase the eight years in prison, nothing could bring back the profitable business Duchaine had stolen from him—nor return his standing in the town. All he had hoped to salvage out of the wreckage of his life that Duchaine had caused, was the satisfaction of wiping out the physical defeat he'd suffered at Duchaine's hands. He had intended to keep trying until he had accomplished that. If he failed the first time, he'd wait and recover and strengthen up and go at it again, until he succeeded in avenging that final affront to his manhood—or died, trying.

But now all that was changed. As Duchaine had shrewdly assumed, Zander's purpose could not be attained in physical attack against what remained of Duchaine as a man.

2

VAL DUCHAINE'S deeply soft voice cut into his brooding: "I want you to know about Jocko, here, Kris; maybe it'll help. The big ape has become almost a part of me. It's almost as though I live within him, now, in a way. He does any necessary violence for me. By the same token, if anything should happen to Jocko, it would be almost as though it happened to me, Kris. Can you understand that? If Jocko Quinn should be hurt—*I'd* be hurt. If he should be killed. . . Well, I don't know

how I'd replace him. I don't know where I'd ever find another man as animal-dumb and faithful, and as able to do little chores as well, almost, as I used to."

Zander frowned. "What are you getting at?"

"This," Duchaine said, slowly. "I'm a changed man in a lot of ways, Kris. I'm a little sorry for the—the dirty deal you got. It had to be, of course; it was necessary for my plans at that time. But the point I'm making is this—now that I've got what I've wanted, I have no ill-feeling toward you. In fact, I'd even like to make up for the bad years you've had in some way. I had in mind that we could once again be useful to each other, Kris, that you might stay here and we'd pick up the old pardnership again. Sage City has grown a little too big for me to handle, tied down as—

"No!" Zander stopped him. He laughed bitterly. "That would be fine for you, wouldn't it, Duchaine—give you a chance to salve your coyote conscience, if any! You're wastin' your breath; I wouldn't sign on with you again, stay in Sage City for all the gold in the Rockies!"

Duchaine nodded his huge head, smiled understandingly. "I can see what those eight years on the hellhole at Yahoo did to you, Kris. Only physical violence will help wash some of that off of you, rid you of the hatred which now prevents you from reasoning intelligently. Remember what I told you about Jocko Quinn, Kris—all that he means to me."

Still looking at Zander, Duchaine's tone changed. It became harsh, bullying. "Jocko!" he said. "This man Zander thinks you're just a stupid pig, fat and soft and ungainly; he figures one fist in the gut would finish you, pronto!"

Jocko worked his huge, sloping shoulders. Almost imperceptibly, under the thick blubber, Zander could see knots of muscle sliding. "He does?" Jocko said, unbelievingly. "You mean he don't know about me?"

"No, Jocko!" Duchaine's hard-hewn features smiled shrewdly. "Matter of fact, you probably couldn't even get him to fight you; he doesn't think you're worth fighting. You know that plump little blonde percentage gal, Julee, you're so loco about, Jocko? You get Zander, here, to give you a workout and I'll see that Julee is assigned to your table tonight; you'll have her all to yourself. Come now, Jocko, I'm a little depressed this morning. I crave some entertainment!"

Kris Zander raised his hand. "Hold it, Duchaine," he said; "it won't work. Maybe you hire Quinn to do your dirty work but you don't put him off onto me as a whipping-boy. I don't want any second-hand vengeance; forget it, Duchaine, I—"

HE NEVER finished the sentence. His arm suddenly felt as though somebody had swung a log and knocked it down; he was spun half around. Quinn had moved with that deceptive, lithe swiftness that big men sometimes have. Arms like oak limbs circled Zander's waist, bear-hugged him, bent him backward until there was no breath in him and the room swam; he could feel his spine cracking. Just as blackness started breaking over him in thick waves, the vise-like pressure about Zander's middle cut off. He felt his legs go slack under him. He was lifted bodily, like a baby. There was the sensation of hurtling through the air; then he hit the wall and pain flashed through him in a hundred places. The second jolt when he hit the floor, was as nothing.

In a moment the room stopped whirling and his eyes focused on Quinn standing over him, arms akimbo, scarcely breathing heavily. Jocko's tiny pocket of a mouth was

trying for a smile and not quite making it.

"You don't want to fight Jocko, eh, Slats?" he said. "We see. We see about it."

Zander saw Jocko's boots coming toward his face and he got his hand up just in time to keep his teeth from being kicked in. He got the heel of his hand under the boot in midair, pushed it sideways and up. Quinn's bulk hitting the floor, shook the walls. Slowly, bracing himself against the wall, fighting the pain and nausea that gripped him, Zander eased himself erect. He made it at the same time that Jocko regained his feet.

Over and above the pain, now, Zander felt anger welling into him. Anger because he was being forced into this, because Quinn was nothing to him; he had nothing against the man—yet had to fight him. There was anger, too, at the weakness that he could feel washing over him now that the temporary stimulation of the liquor had been knocked out of him. Because of that weakness, he knew that he could not fight long; he would have to get this finished fast —either way.

The two men circled each other warily for a moment and Zander heard Duchaine chuckle, say: "What are you waitin' on, Kris? Go after him! Pretend that it's me! Go ahead and get rid of the kill-craze that's been burnin' you like a fever!"

That did it. The words or just the sound of Duchaine's deep, silken voice did it. With a muted sound of rage, Zander flung himself toward Quinn's mountainous bulk. He felt his right fist club solidly against the redhead's jaw. He could feel the shock of the blow all the way to his elbow and exhultation whipped through him. He sunk his other fist into Jocko's middle and it was like striking a thinly padded steel wall. Zander stood there, feet spraddled apart and slugged, right and left, with everything he had, wondering vaguely why the other man wasn't blocking any of the blows.

In a few minutes Zander had swung himself out. His arms grew lead-heavy and dropped to his sides. He was exhausted; his whole lean length bent forward from the waist, wearily. He raised his eyes slowly to inspect the damage he had wrought on his opponent.

The big man stood there, one eye a little puffed, but he was grinning. He wasn't hurt at all, Zander saw, and knew that he had failed. He realized that there had been no power behind his punches, because of the weakness and the sickness that was in him. He had been like a six-year-old, futilely pummeling a grown man in infantile rage.

With a sobbing curse he tried to swing one more punch. Before it had floated halfway toward Quinn, the big man backhanded him, leisurely. The blow caught him across the ear and he staggered sideways and fell. He saw Jocko's boots coming toward him, he saw one of them raise up to kick him, but this time, he was incapable of fending it off. He felt a knife-slash of pain across the basket of his ribs. He was half-rolled, half slithered by the force of the kick, to the foot of Duchaine's wheel chair.

He heard Quinn say: "Boss, how come they don't toughen 'em up more up there at the Yahoo Pen? I'm sorry we couldn't have been more entertainin', but your boy, there, wasn't very cooperatin'!" And that was all that Zander heard as the pain all through him reached the breaking point...

MUSIC WAS the first thing he heard, if you could call it music—the off-tune, jumpy plunking of a clangy old piano and a wheez-

ing accordion, accompanying it three or four notes behind. The sounds came to Zander, muffled and mingled with the noise of wild laughter and raucous singing. It came to him, slowly, fuzzily, that he was in a room up over the *Black Deuce*.

The dull glow from a kerosene lamp fell gently over Zander's thin, swollen features. He moved his body a little and came to the realization that he was on a bed or a couch. He raised his aching head and took in some of the details of the room. It was a small den, crudely but comfortably furnished, and the thing he was lying on was a leather-covered couch.

It was when he swung his legs off and down to the floor that he saw the man, sitting by the door on a straight chair tipped back onto its hind legs. He was only slightly shorter than Zander and almost as thin; but he was younger and his satanic, sharp-featured good looks didn't show the ravages of prison that Zander's features held. Other than that, they were similar in build and general appearance.

Zander looked admiringly at the other's thick crop of black hair and his healthy-looking, ruddy tan, and wondered how long it would take his own hair to grow out, for the sun to beat some of the pallor from his face and hands. Then Zander moved too suddenly and every aching muscle and joint in his body screamed from the mild beating Jocko Quinn had given him.

Sitting very still, almost holding his breath against the soreness of his ribs, Zander stared at the man by the door. "Who are you?" he demanded, finally.

The other man's pale blue eyes, contrasting strikingly against his dark hair and ruddily swarthy skin, didn't answer for a moment. He stared back at Zander, blankly, almost as though looking through him. He shifted a quill toothpick from one corner of his wide, arrogant mouth to the other. "They call me Irish; if I have another name, it's not anybody's business, not even yours."

"A hardcase," Zander said. "You must work for Duchaine, too. What are you doin' here? What am *I* doin' here?" He suddenly realized that someone had removed his outer clothing, even his shoes. He was clad only in the itchy, drab gray underclothing the penitentiary had issued. "What happened to my clothes?"

Irish nodded to his left; Zander's eyes shifted, saw the new outfit draped neatly over a chair. His eyes took on life as he looked at the hand-stitched black shirt, the black, whipcord trousers and the shiny, hand-tooled expensive black boots standing neatly side by side in front of the chair. He got up from the couch and ambled painfully toward the chair, fingers felt the material in that outfit, lovingly. He saw, too, the gunbelt and the silver-mounted .44 in its holster, slung over one corner of the back of the chair. Then he pulled his fingers away from the crisp, smooth material of the black shirt as though they'd been burned. He straightened, said sharply: "Where are *my* clothes?"

"There," Irish said, sulkily. "You're lookin' right at 'em. Get washed up and shaved in that bowl

over in the corner and put them duds on; somebody wants to talk to you."

"Duchaine bought those clothes," Zander said, tightly. "He thinks he's smart, thinks they'll get me and I'll weaken. You go tell Duchaine what he can do with his stinkin' gifts and get me my own stuff before there's trouble."

Irish's thin brown, long fingered hands dropped to the Colts nestling against the outside of his thighs. "I don't reckon the trouble will be much," he said. "And those are the only clothes you've got. Put 'em on! We burned the others. That prison-issued garb reeked of disinfectant."

Zander opened his mouth to argue, then shut it again. The years at Yahoo had taught him to resign himself quickly to the inevitable. He stripped and went to the deep bowl full of rainwater in the corner, scoured himself thoroughly. A new hair-splitting sharp straight razor skimmed the stubble from his gaunt face without too much pain. Then he donned the black outfit Duchaine had bought. In spite of himself, he thrilled to the feeling of the expensive cloth and being duded up like this in the old way again seemed to give him strength and confidence. Looking at himself in a cracked and fly-specked mirror, he saw that even a touch of color had come back into his drawn cheeks.

He turned around suddenly at the sound of the door opening. He saw Irish standing back to let a woman enter the room, heard Irish say: "All right, Mrs. Duchaine, you can talk to him, now!"

SOMEHOW Zander got to a chair and leaned on the back of it to keep himself from falling. Flashes of heat and cold seared through him and in that few seconds he both shivered and perspired. The woman stood just inside the room, her head tilted forward just a shade so that she had to look up at him a little from under her thick, spiked, black upper lashes. She was small. If Zander held her close to him, her head would have leaned against his chest; he knew that because he had held her so, many times.

It had been eight years since Zander had seen a woman, and even if it had only been eight minutes, the sight of this one would have affected him the same way. When he first set eyes on her, it had always hurt his eyes for a few moments, just as though somebody was pressing their thumbs against them. It was still that way. Then when his vision got accustomed to the brilliance of her beauty, he let his eyes go all over her, hungrily.

"Lucia!" He suddenly didn't know what to do with his hands. They felt big and awkward, dangling at his sides. "Or should I say—Mrs. Duchaine?" The hands clenched into fists.

She turned her head away and looked down, away from him, as though ashamed. The lamp glow made fiery highlights in her coppery hair, piled high on her head in a stunning pompadour. It made warm shadows and highlights along the shapely roundness of her shoulders and upper arms, revealed by the breath-taking off-the-shoulder gown she was wearing.

"Please," she said, the husky softness of her voice like a rush of warm summer wind in Zander's ears. "Don't let's discuss that now, Kris... Kris, I— I'm worried about you! You look so thin, so—so tired and bitter and hard. You've changed so, Kris. I'd have hardly known you." She looked up again and her heart-shaped, lovely face held a pained, sympathetic expression.

"Is that so?" Zander said. "Val knew me right away."

"He was expecting you, Kris. Val heard that you were—getting out." She took a half step toward him,

reached for him hesitantly and then drew back her hand. "You're like a different man, Kris! What did they do to you up there?"

"They didn't do it all; your husband's hired ape, Quinn, did some of it, this morning." He touched his sore, swollen ear, ran the hand around to the still throbbing lumps on the back of his head. "Or was it yesterday? How long was I out?"

"You slept all day," she told him. "It's night time, now. Val had you brought up here to this room over the *Black Deuce.*" Her eyes flashed at him, then looked away again quickly. "We—Val and I—live up here, too, Kris."

"How cozy," he said. "So I'm just like one of the family now, eh? Whose idea was it to buy me this black outfit?"

"I remembered how loco you were about black, Kris," Lucia said. "How handsome it made you look. I thought—"

"Yuh," he cut in. "But that was before I got gaunt as a timber wolf, had my hair chopped at the roots. And what you thought was that a lot of fancy-dan duds was going to sell me on stayin' here, teamin' up with your husband. He intimated before that he had some use for me; I reckon that's why he sent you up here, figgered you could sweet-talk me into it. Once you could have, Lucia—into anything. But not anymore. Like you said, I ain't the same man. Thanks for the clothes, Mrs. Duchaine, and goodbye; I'm gettin' out of here."

HE MOVED to step around her, head toward the door, but she moved right with him, blocking him and she was so close to him now, he could smell the heady, musky scent of her perfume. It made his head swim. She clutched at his arms. "No, Kris! Don't be a fool! You—you can't go! You're right; Val *does* need your help, but that isn't the reason I'm here. *I* need you, too, Kris!"

She held onto his arms, tightly; her eyes locked with his. "Listen to me, Kris! Val tricked me, too. He had me sold that you were the one who backshot my brother, Tom. You don't know what that did to me, Kris—thinking the man I'd loved, had killed my own brother. It—it didn't take very much for Val to talk me into becoming his wife. I—well—it didn't seem to matter; nothing did. I didn't care what happened to me. He—he seemed good and kind and I thought—hoped—that maybe eventually I'd forget you, learn to love Val. But it didn't work out that way."

"How long did it take you to find out what kind of a hombre Duchaine really was?"

"Two days. The second day he got drunk, beat me with his fists, he told me the truth about what happened to Tom. He gloated over that, laughed at me, at the way he'd tricked me—as well as you! You don't know what finding that out, did to me, Kris. I—I grabbed up Val's gun and told him I was leaving and that if he tried to stop me, I'd kill him! Well—he tried to stop me, of course and—I don't know—something went wrong. I got soft; I couldn't kill him but I did shoot him. I shot Val in the legs, both legs. I guess I had some loco idea that that way, he couldn't run after me. Anyhow, I got away from him... But later, when I heard that he—you know—lost his legs, was helpless, my conscience bothered me. I—I felt that he really needed me, now. So I went back to him. But it's been hell, Kris; you don't know what it's been like!"

"Very touching," he said. He was fighting to keep control of himself. As she'd talked he'd watched the sinuous movement of her full lips. It was as much as he could do to keep from grabbing her up in his arms.

"What's all that got to do with me?"

"Kris, don't you see? Now we both have a chance to even the score with Val! He doesn't need me any more—hasn't for a long time now. He's become so big and powerful in Sage City that he doesn't need anybody; I have no more illusions about that. I've paid my penalty for maiming Val, so I'm going to leave him now, Kris. I'm leaving with you; you're going to take me away with you, out of here, out of Sage City and away from Val. It can be your vengeance, too, Kris!"

His breath caught hard in his chest and Zander couldn't seem to swallow, nor to speak for a moment. Finally, he managed: "I couldn't do that, Lucia! I'm not a wife-stealer, whatever else I may be. It—it wouldn't work, anyhow. No matter what Duchaine is, what he's done, we couldn't do that to him; we'd never be happy. Perhaps, if he were a whole man, but the way he is..."

She shook him gently by the arms. Her eyes burned up into his. "It would only be justice," she said. "If it wasn't for Val, you and I would have been together a long time, now. We were fixin' to get married when Tom was killed, and Val spoiled it for us; you forget that, Kris!"

He didn't answer; he looked down at this woman, remembering the way it used to be with them, thinking of the things he had missed—which she was offering him, now. And in a way she was right. It came to him that with the privilege of avenging himself upon Duchaine with fists or guns denied, this might be a fitting substitute. He could almost see the surprise and rage in the big man's heavily-handsome face when he heard about it.

"I—I don't know," Zander said, finally, weakly. "I—let me think about it awhile. I'd have to have a few days to strengthen up, anyhow, before we could do it. Duchaine would send riders out after us; I ain't strong enough to go through anything like that, yet. I found that out when I tackled Quinn."

"I know," she said. "That's what I had in mind, anyhow. A few days, maybe a week, even. Meanwhile, we'll have to be careful. If Val got even an inkling, he'd kill us both. He'd—"

"Weren't you taking a chance coming up here, then?" he cut in. "How about that slimjim hardcase outside, one calls himself Irish?"

"Forget Irish," she said, impatiently. "He wouldn't tell Val anything, hardly even talks to him. He works for Val, has hired his guns to him for a big price but he hates him! You don't have to worry about Irish... And it was Val who sent me up here to see you; he figured I could influence you to stay—and sign on with him again." She smiled, ironically. "So maybe you'd best get down and talk to him about that. Tell him anything, Kris; stall him. Anything. He said you could find him downstairs at the end of the bar if you felt up to getting down there. I —I'd better go now."

She went up on tiptoe, still clutching him by the arms. She kissed him on the chin and the touch of her lips was like fire, shocking all through him. He felt all his tendons tensing as he fought to keep from grabbing her into his arms. He watched her turn away to the door, yank it open. Outside the door, he saw Irish, move away and knew that the other had been listening. He wondered how much he'd heard; then the door was shut and Zander was alone again.

3

HE WENT to the holstered .44 and gunbelt, examined it and saw that there were no slugs in either. He grinned to himself, wryly; Duchaine wasn't taking too many chances, yet. Zander paced the room, trying to figure the situation, to make up his mind. But he couldn't think; he kept seeing Lucia, changed a little, older, but even more beautiful, in his mind. His ears kept hearing her voice, and he couldn't think at all.

After awhile he gave it up, left the room and went downstairs. He came out through a rear door into the *Black Deuce*. Entering the saloon, the noise of the place hit him like a blast. He pushed through the crowds milling around the faro tables, headed for the bar. As he moved, he became aware that all eyes in the place were upon him. He heard whispering voices say: "—fresh out o' the territorial pen—they turn 'em out of there meaner'n when they went in"... "—Kris Zander, man who shot town marshal, nearly ten years ago. Used to be pardner o' Duchaine's."... "—heard he always used to wear all black like that!"... "Wonder if he's fixin' to stay on in Sage City?..."

Zander reached the bar, ignoring the curious stares that turned his way, but he didn't see any sign of Duchaine. Moving through the crowds he avoided the pawing clutches of powdered, husky-voiced percentage girls and made his way toward the batwings at the front of the place. He stepped out onto the wide front verandah of the *Black Deuce*, blowing the smoke-filled air of the place out of his lungs, sucking in deep of the crisp night breeze off the desert.

Far up at the other end of Main Street, Zander saw that some kind of public meeting was being carried on; vaguely, he could make out a man standing under a banner sign, on the back of a freighter's wagon, with a crowd around him, bearing pine knot torches. He could hear the man's voice, raised, angry, shouting, but couldn't distinguish the words. Occasionally there was the sound of cheers and applause.

A voice came from the darkness of the verandah a few feet away from Zander. It said: "I can save you a trip down there to find out what that's all about, Kris." There was a chuckle. Zander turned and his eyes accustomed to the outside darkness, now, became aware of the dim bulk of a man in a wheel chair and knew that it was Duchaine, out there with him. "It's about me," Duchaine went on. "Public indignation meeting; they have 'em all the time. Sage City Reform Committee For Better Government, they call themselves. I call 'em fools. They've got some kind of notion that I own Sage City, Kris, that the sheriff's in my pay, and I pull all kinds of shady deals so that the small businessman in town can't make a decent livin'. They claim the *Black Deuce* cuts its whisky and its wheels are crooked, that I use guns and force to prevent competition. They think if they could get rid of me, the town could be cleaned up." He laughed again. "Mebbe they're right. *If* they could get rid of me. What do you think, Kris?"

ZANDER didn't answer; he stood there, staring into the cool darkness, thinking about Lucia being married to this man, thinking about the plan she'd suggested.

"Sorry about Quinn," Duchaine said. "I never would have sicced him on you, Kris, if I'd reckoned you were so weak. I knew you were thin but I figured you were probably tough and strong. In the old days you could have taken Jocko after a good workout. I

thought maybe a tussle with him would clean some of the poison out of your system... Well, mebbe you can have a go at him again after you get stronger."

"What makes you think I'm stayin' around?" Zander said, quickly.

Duchaine made his humorless chuckling sound. "Lucia seemed to think you might. That black outfit looks right nice on you, Kris. A little rest, little meat on your bones and you'll be like the old Kris Zander I used to know. The one they used to call Black Lightning. I could use a man like that."

"So I understand. What have you got in mind, Duchaine?"

There was a pause, then: "No sense in going into detail right now; plenty of time. But the general idea is that with this damned Citizen's Committee stirring up a stink all the time, Sage City has gotten to be a little big to handle. Jocko and Irish used to be enough help—but not any more. What I need's a man with your all-around savvy. All I'm payin' Irish for is his gunswift; you used to be handier with a six than three men like Irish. With a little practise you probably still are. So I'll be able to get rid of him; never liked that arrogant, poker-faced cuss, anyhow. Don't trust 'im."

"Duchaine," Zander answered, "we owned the *Black Deuce* together. We were pardners. But we only ran the saloon; we weren't runnin' the town. We were honest businessmen. That was one of the reasons you had to get me out of the picture the way you did, because you had ambition; you could see where Sage City was ripe to be taken over by some enterprisin' jackal with no scruples—and you knew I wouldn't have any part of that. What makes you think I've changed?"

Duchaine built and lit a quirly, the flare of the sulphur match lighting up his massive head, seemingly bodyless for a moment, against the surrounding darkness. "Don't be foolish, Kris," Duchaine said. "Face reality. You have nothing to do with the situation that exists in town today; you surely can't change it. And there's an old saying—if you can't fight the enemy, join 'em. One thing; outside of moments of anger, you were always a reasonable man, Kris. Be reasonable now."

Zander didn't answer and Duchaine went on: "There's no hurry. Take a week; do nothing but enjoy my hospitality—and Lucia's." He paused to let that sink in. "Get your strength back. Practise ridin' and shootin' and get a line on the town. Then make up your mind... Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll get on inside and take care of my business."

For long moments after Duchaine wheeled himself back into the saloon, Zander stood looking into the darkness and trying to make up his mind, but didn't get anywhere. He was beginning to stiffen and ache again from the beating Quinn had given him. A terrible tiredness swept over him and he just about made it back up to his room and collapsed on the bed...

THE WEEK did a lot for Kris Zander. He put on a good fifteen pounds; he used one of Duchaine's stable of horses and spent his days riding and loosening up his gun wrist, getting his eye back. His hair grew out enough so that it was no longer just a stubble. His lean cheeks filled some and the sun colored him—a sore red at first, then darkening to a good tan. He went to bed early every night and rested. And all that time he thought and worked out the situation in his mind. At the end of the week, he knew what he had to do.

Along with Zander's physical health and strength, his mind and morale had been restored to normalcy, too. He learned like most men that time weakens the craving for revenge, changes a man's perspective. His hate for Duchaine was dulled, now, and he

realized that there was nothing here in Sage City for him, any more. During that week he'd seen a lot of Lucia, too and although her beauty still disturbed him he learned that it was purely surface; underneath, she was a bitter, cruel and unscrupulous woman. Either living with Val Duchaine so long had changed her—or else she had always been that way and Zander had merely been too young, too in love to realize the truth. Deep inside of him, Zander knew now that he could never be happy with Lucia, even if running off with her didn't rub against the grain with him.

And that changed his attitude toward Duchaine, too. In a way he was almost thankful to the man for saving him from Lucia and felt that justice had taken its toll on Duchaine by burdening him with a wife who loathed him, would double-deal him at the first opportunity.

With a small stake borrowed from Duchaine the night before he decided to leave, Zander got into a poker game and won enough to return Duchaine's stake and buy himself a horse, and enough stuff to fill a warbag for a few months of drifting until he found a cow outfit he'd like to sign on with.

The next morning he was packing the warbag when Lucia came into his room. He turned to her slowly, saw her eyes widen, then narrow. "Kris!" she said. "You—you're leaving! Why didn't you tell me? Listen, Kris, you can't leave yet—not so suddenly."

He stood very straight and the muscles of his lean jaws clenched. "I'm sorry, Lucia," he told her. "You said for me to take a week and make up my mind. Well, I've done that; I can't stay in Sage City—not for Duchaine—nor you! I'm clearing out today."

She grew very pale, then rushed toward him. She flung herself at him, her eyes pleading up to him. "No, Kris!" she begged. "Don't leave yet. Wait—wait until tomorrow, anyhow! Think it over some more, Kris!"

FOR A MOMENT, with Lucia pressed close against him like that, with her lips a few inches from his own, warm and soft looking, with her eyes large and scared looking the way they were, he almost weakened. Then, in desperation, he took her wrists in his hands almost roughly. He shoved her away from him. He said: "It's no use, Lucia; the past can't be rebuilt. What's done is done. You've got your place—you made it your own self. Somewhere, now, I've got to find mine. But it's not here; that I know."

He turned from her before he could change his mind, bent over the warbag, again. He heard the sound of quick, stealthy movement, behind him but he thought it was only Lucia leaving the room. Then a harsh, flat voice said: "Slacken down, Zander. I don't reckon you're goin' anyplace suddenlike."

Zander wheeled and the man called Irish was in the room. He was standing beside Lucia; twin .44's filled the gunshark's long, thin brown fingers. Pale cold blue eyes regarded Zander amusedly as Zander glanced at the gunbelt and empty holsters slung over a chair and realized that the weapons Irish held were his, Zander's, the ones he'd purchased with some of his poker winnings. Irish had glided into the room while Zander's back was turned, emptied Zander's holsters. Zander

watched Irish kick the door of the room shut with his heel.

"What is this, Lucia?" Zander demanded. "What's this fish-eyed coyote up to?"

Slowly he watched Lucia's face change as she framed her answer before speaking. Her eyes seemed to lengthen and narrow, take on the same slant as Irish's. Her full lips spread in a smile but it was a sly, catlike expression, with no beauty in it. Zander had once seen the same look on the face of a lynx as it stood gloatingly over the rabbit it had killed and was about to devour. She said, finally, an excited note of triumph in her voice: "You tell him, Irish! I want him to hear it from you! The honorable jailbird, too high'n'mighty to steal another man's wife. He turned me down, Irish; what do you think of that? But tell him it doesn't really matter, only forces our hand a little early!"

"We hadn't planned on making our move for another week, at least," Irish said. "Until after Duchaine had made his next monthly collection from the homesteaders on the land he owns out in the valley. That would have given us another few thousand dollars; but there'll be enough as is. Turn around, Zander! Face the wall!"

Lucia said, "You scrawny, prison-marked buzzard, did you really reckon that I was still in love with you? You did, didn't you? See what a good job I did, Irish? Look at the surprise, the hurt on his face! Tell him how ever since we heard he was gettin' out of prison and figgered he'd come back here, we'd planned on this."

Zander's thoughts were a whirl of confusion. Looking at these two—the woman he had once thought he'd loved and her husband's gunsharp hireling—icy fear gripped him. He said: "I don't get it! Where do I fit in? What will you get out of killing me? You—"

"Shut up and turn around like I said," Irish cut in. "I'm not fixing to gun you—if you do as you're told. But keep ignoring my orders and I'll let air through you so fast you won't even know what happened. Turn!"

Slowly, his hands raised shoulder-high, Zander turned. He had hardly completed the move when there was a gonging in his ear. He had the sensation of falling from a mountainous place, down, down into onrushing darkness...

HE DREAMED that he came out of the blackness into a waterfall. He was lying beneath it, unable to move, and tons of water was cascading over him, blinding him, drowning him. His lungs were filled and he couldn't breathe. Then, abruptly, he was out from under the deluge. He blinked his eyes open, felt the water running from them and his head was soaked and dripping. He was wet clean to the waist and this part of it, he realized, was no dream. He was conscious once again. He spit out a mouthful of water and looked up and saw Van Duchaine, in his wheel chair, leaning over him, holding the now empty bowl of rainwater from the corner of Zander's room.

Slowly, Zander rose to his feet, fighting off the dizziness that swirled around his head. He put a hand tenderly to the lump at the back of his skull, shook the ringing from his ears. "Lucia!" he said, dazedly. "And Irish! They—" He cut the words off, seeing the expression on Duchaine's face.

The legless man suddenly looked old and bloated, his eyes dull with shock. His face was gray and suddenly lined, as though he'd aged twenty years in the past few minutes. He said: "You don't have to tell me. I found out about them. I'd suspicioned it for several months now—but I hadn't really believed. Lucia was always taking Irish's part when I'd talk about firing him, and they always managed to be together a lot.

But in spite of those signs I couldn't make myself really believe she would do that to me. I've been watching them carefully, though; Lucia knew that the citizen's committee were after my hide and that things were getting tight here in Sage City. I reckon she figgered that Val Duchaine was just about through as the big gun here, so there was no sense in her and Irish stickin' it out any longer. I—I overheard the conversation in here with you, Kris; I was outside the door, eavesdropping. I managed to wheel away before they came out, though and they didn't know I'd overheard. When they left I came in here to you."

"But—but where have they gone? What are they up to?" Zander said.

Duchaine tipped his huge head to one side, cupped a big hand behind his ear. "Listen!" he said.

Faintly, outside, Zander heard wild shouting and the sound of shots, the thunder of hoof beats. He saw Duchaine wheel his chair around, head out the door into the hall. "Follow me!" he told Zander.

Zander followed Duchaine down to the end of the hall and into a big office at the front of the building. He sat by a window that looked down onto the street. "Come here, Kris!" he said; "look at this!"

From the window, Zander could see a knot of men gathered in front of the Sage City Public Bank, a few doors down from the *Black Deuce* and across the street. Inside the cluster of men, two figures were sprawled in the dust of Main Street. The rest were staring up the street, some of them crouched and firing sixguns after a man on horseback, heading hell-for-leather out of town. Once, just before he disappeared from sight, the rider looked back. He was dressed in solid black, Zander saw. He was slim; his face was covered by a black kerchief with two eye-slits cut into it. His head was covered by a flat black Stetson, a twin to the one Zander wore.

"Irish!" Zander whispered. "He—he must've robbed the bank, killed a couple of hombres in the getaway!"

"Yuh!" Duchaine said, softly. "*You* know it's Irish but that bunch out there, doesn't, Kris. They think it's you! Old Black Lightning! You see, Irish never wears black—you always do! It's the only outfit you have and people have been used to seeing you in it. What else are they going to think when a lone bandit, about your height, your build, dressed in solid black, carrying silver-mounted sixes, pulls a daring daylight bank robbery?... They were clever, both of them, setting it up this way. Lucia pretended she picked out that black outfit for you because it would make you yearn for the old days when you used to wear one all the time! You couldn't tell those men from the bank it was anybody but you, Zander!"

Duchaine gestured toward a chair in the corner. "Sit down there, Kris, out of sight of the door. I don't reckon we'll have long to wait; Irish will hit out o' town a mile or so and double back here, come in the rear entrance of the *Black Deuce*. It's goin' to do me right good to see their faces —both of 'em—when they find out old Val is boogerin' their plans!"

But Zander could see that it wasn't really going to do Duchaine any good. He had always felt that Duchaine was a cold man, emotionless, incapable of normal feeling. Now Zander saw that was not so. A corner of Duchaine's mouth was twitching convulsively; veins stood out in his high forehead. He kept pushing back the lion-like lengths of gray hair, his hand trembling. The expression on his face was like that of a kid who's just learned there is no Santa Claus. Zander reckoned, that in his own way, Duchaine had really loved and trusted Lucia. This was hurting not only his pride and vanity but his heart as well; Zander almost felt sorry for him.

4

THEY SAT there in Duchaine's big office and waited. Duchaine, facing the door, just out of sight of anyone entering with a bone handled sixgun in his right hand. He kept thumbing back the hammer nervously, and easing it back down again. Zander sat, too, his own long-fingered, bony hands empty, feeling useless. It seemed like hours, yet Zander knew it could not have been much over thirty minutes when there was the sound of footsteps from the backstairs. They stopped down the hall, at the room Zander was in. There was the sound of excited voices and flat, vicious cursing.

"He's gone!" they heard Irish say; "that rannyhan must have a skull thick as cast iron!"

"You didn't hit him hard enough," Lucia answered. "Damn you, Irish, I told you to hit him again, to make sure!"

Zander winced, shuddered, hearing this. He heard Irish say: "Shut your ugly mouth and let's hunt him down; he may still be in the building!"

The footsteps came toward the office. Lucia entered first, Irish right behind her, still wearing the black outfit, except for the kerchief covering his face, that looked like Zander's costume. In his right hand, dangling loosely at his side, Irish carried one of Zander's guns.

Duchaine waited until they got fully inside the office, then said: "You two are greedy, aren't you? You had to make this a large-scale deal; the bank dinero wasn't enough. You had to come back here and finish up—kill me and frame Zander for that, too. Then Lucia could sell the *Black Deuce,* all my property and holdings in town. You'd have all that in addition to the bank money; I admire your thoroughness!"

Irish made a snarling noise, whirled toward Duchaine, his gun-hand raising. There was the thunder-crack sound of Duchaine's gun and Irish's .44 went skittering from his hand and clanked to the floor, the barrel smashed and twisted where Duchaine had shot it from his hand. Irish grabbed the hand, wrung it, his face twisted with pain.

"Get against that wall, Irish, you coyote!" Duchaine ordered. "You, Lucia, my loving and faithful spouse, move to the opposite side of the office. I'm sorry to separate you from your—lover, but obviously the two of you together are a combination that can't be trusted!"

Both did as directed, too thunderstruck by the sudden turn of events to even speak, yet. Then, as she stood against the wall, Lucia, her eyes large and frightened, said to her husband: "Val, you—surely you don't think I'd do anything like this to you! I—Val—I was just pretending to go along with Irish to see how far he'd go, so I'd know all his plans. But then I got in too deep. He—he forced me to go the rest of the way with him. I—"

"Please, Lucia!" Duchaine stopped her. "You're making me ill!" He put one large hand to his massive forehead, wiped away perspiration. "Your lying doesn't improve under stress! ...And you see, Irish, how a woman will turn on a man; now, in her desperation she's turning on you!"

Duchaine, smiling grimly, started to turn his head toward Lucia. He hadn't quite made it when there was a flat crack of sound, like a miniature echo of Duchaine's sixgun shot. A look of vast surprise and disbelief flickered over Duchaine's heavily handsome features.

Lucia was wearing a lace-trimmed shirtwaist and a wide, red silk sash that emphasized the slimness of her waist. It had also proved a clever hid-

ing place for the tiny derringer she now held in her scarlet-nailed fingers. Smoke trickled lazily from the barrel of the deadly weapon.

Lucia's full, sensual lips curled at the corners as she watched her husband stare at her, lean forward in his wheel chair. His mouth moved but no sound came out of it. The sixgun tumbled from his big, thick fingers, clumped to the floor. Then Duchaine's tremendous torso fell forward out of the wheelchair, hit the floor hard, like a life-size bust knocked from a shelf. Duchaine's hands clawed spasmodically at the rough flooring of the office for an instant and then were still.

KRIS ZANDER was the first to move, first to break the spell that had seemed to seize them all, freezing them stiffly, like figures in a tableau. He flung himself onto Irish, landing on the other man just as he stooped to scoop up the silver-mounted .44 that Duchaine had previously from his hand. Zander twisted Irish around, caught him a glancing blow with a right uppercut brought up from the floor. Even though it did not hit full force the blow staggered Irish back against the wall. Then as Irish bounced back off the wall and Zander set himself for another swing, something leaped, clawing and spitting like a wildcat, onto his back. Long, carmine tipped nails gouged at his eyes, blinding him so that he couldn't see, and as Zander struggled against the twisting, kicking, clawing figure of Lucia Duchaine on his back, he felt Irish's fist strike him full in the mouth. He felt his lips turn to swollen pulp and blood was suddenly thick in his throat.

Dimly Zander heard again the booming sound of a gunshot, echoing in the close confines of the office. The weight suddenly slipped from his back; he staggered, wheeled and saw Lucia sprawled face-down on the floor, a ribbon of crimson wriggling from the blackened hole in the center of her blouse. On the floor, a few feet away from Lucia, Val Duchaine held his six-gun at arm's length, black oily smoke still gouting from the long muzzle.

Duchaine's eyes were glazed and half-closed. His chin, braced against the floor, was the only thing that held his head up. His voice hoarse and weak and thick, whispered: "You should have used somethin' bigger than a derringer on a man my size, Lucia! I—I'll see you in hell, honey. We both—"

He couldn't finish. His great head thumped sideways to the floor, a long hank of iron-gray hair tumbling down over one cheek. The sixgun slipped from his stiffening fingers.

Before either Zander or Irish recovered from their surprise, heavy footsteps pounded out in the hallway and a huge figure burst into the room. In a loose-sleeved crimson silk shirt, Jocko Quinn looked to Zander twice as big as he had looked the first day he'd met him. Sweat ran down the fat man's face. At first he didn't see Zander and Irish, standing back from the doorway; he saw only Val and Lucia Duchaine on the floor. Swiftly, Jock kneeled down beside Duchaine.

"Boss! What—what happened here? Boss, you got to wake up! All hell's broke loose in the town. That—that hombre, Zander, robbed the bank and shot a couple of tellers. They went after him but lost his trail outside of town. They figure he doubled back here. A whole mob, lynch-mad, carryin' rawhide and rifles are headin' here. Riled up the way they are, they liable to want to string up you and—Boss! Boss!"

Realization of what finding his boss on the floor like this really meant, finally penetrated Quinn's dull brain. Slowly he swiveled about on his heels, still hunkered down. He saw Zander and Irish standing there and his round, lardy face looked as though

It might pucker up and cry any minute. He said, vaguely:

"He—he's been shot! Dead, probably! Miz Duchaine, too! What—what happened here?"

"Zander!" Irish said, quickly. "He came back here and killed Val and Lucia! You know that's what he came here for in the first place, to avenge himself on Duchaine! ...You goin' to let him get away with gut-shootin' your boss, Jocko! Take him, Quinn, while I go tell the mob what's happened!"

Zander saw Irish dart toward the door. He grabbed for him and missed. He said: "Don't let him hooraw you, Jocko! That isn't what happened!" Zander dove after Irish, but he was a second too late. Quinn had been moving toward him slowly, stiff-legged, like a sleepwalker. His stupid little eyes fixed on Zander's face, his small mouth working, saying in a hate-filled voice: "Zander! Yes! Zander did this! Zander!"

JOCKO QUINN leaped and caught Zander by the arm before he could get out the door after Irish. He twisted the arm and flung Zander crashing against the wall. This time Jocko Quinn wasn't fooling. He came bulling in after Zander, hoping to catch him stunned, off balance, before he could recover. Zander's brains were rattled by the force with which he struck the wall but his naturally sharp reflexes took over when he saw the three hundred pound giant coming at him.

Zander sprung away from the wall, bent double and heard the whirtling sound of Jocko's ham-like fist breezing over his head. The fist struck the wall and there was the sound of wood splintering under the bellow of pain and rage that burst from Quinn's mouth. The fat man was only half turned again when Zander pressed his advantage. He caught Quinn in the kidneys with a full swing and saw the big fellow wince, hunch up and fall back way from him. Lithe as a tiger, Zander went after him, now. He pistoned lefts and rights into Quinn's great pumpkin of a face, watched with grim satisfaction the blood spurting from Quinn's now completely flattened little nose. Quinn spat out a piece of broken tobacco-stained tooth; then he brought an arm swinging up out of nowhere and his fist caught Zander just above the ear.

It felt to Zander as though he'd been clubbed with a pickaxe handle. He felt himself spinning backward. He fell over an office chair, rolled until he hit the wall, then clambered up it, still dizzy, the room still dipping lazily, until he was on his feet again. He saw Quinn moving around the overturned chair. Zander waited until the other man was only a few feet away from him, starting another roundhouse swing. Then he doubled over, ran full tilt toward Quinn, butting his head into that great overhang of belly.

Quinn's breath riffled Zander's hair like air from a bellows. Zander looked up and saw the fat man's doughy face turned a yellowish green in color. He followed through quickly, drubbing two hard rights and a solid, thundering left to the hinge of the fat boy's jaw. Any one of those punches would have finished an ordinary man,

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but Jocko Quinn only rolled his head and floundered a little groggily on his feet. Then suddenly Quinn kicked out with a heavy boot in a savage blow that would have smashed Zander's kneecap, ended the fight right there, if it had landed. But at the last instant Zander saw it coming, twisted his leg and the fat man's heavy boot scraped along the inside of Zander's thigh. But as it was, the kick took part of Zander's trousers and some raw flesh with it.

The kick also put Quinn off balance, set him up for a hard, hooking right. This one, Zander saw, did the trick. He watched Quinn totter, saw the whites of those little pig-eyes as they rolled up toward his head. He measured the fat man and whipped another arcing right up from around his knees. The punch landed on the roundness of Quinn's three chins. Quinn went up onto tiptoes like some lazy, grotesque fire-dancer, pirouetted clumsily and went crashing to the floor on his face.

Zander had to spread his feet apart to keep from falling, himself, now that it was over. He discovered that one sleeve was ripped from his shirt and there were the bleeding clawmarks of Quinn's fingers from shoulder to wrist. One side of his face felt swollen hard and puffed to three times its normal size, the eye on that side already half closed.

Then, in the sudden silence of the room, Zander became aware of the noise from outside of the building. He staggered toward the window, looked out and down onto Main Street. A mob of fifty or sixty townsmen, armed with rifles and clubs, several of them carrying thick coils of rope, were clustered around the front of the *Black Deuce*. They were shouting and yelling to be let in, the angry sounds of their voice blurring to a roaring din. Then Zander heard someone shout: "Let's bust on in and hunt down the dirty sons! If anyone in town's protectin' that murderin', thievin' Zander, it's Duchaine! They were once pardners and Zander's been stayin' here with him, since he came back, ain't he? Let's get in there!"

Zander knew that, without anybody to back his story, he wouldn't stand a chance trying to argue with a worked-up mob like that. Before he could hardly open his mouth they'd have him strung up on the big cottonwood just outside of town. He twisted away from the window, scooped up Duchaine's sixgun and raced staggeringly down the second floor hallway to the rear stairs, stumbled down them three at a time. A back alley brought him out onto the street behind the *Black Deuce*.

A big gray was saddled up and hitched to the rail outside of a feed store. Zander unhitched the gray, forked into the saddle, dug in his heels and took off toward the South end of town. He said a mumbled prayer through his swollen lips that he had chosen the right direction and that he could ride hard and fast enough to overcome Irish's long lead.

ABOUT A MILE out of Sage City, on the Valley trail, the wind carried the sound of shouting and thundering hooves, from behind Zander. He twisted in the saddle saw a dust cloud about a group of hard-riding horsemen coming from town and Zander knew that the mob had broken in, found him gone. Now some of them had mounted and struck out after him.

Zander leaned low over the gray's neck, whispered into the critter's ear, urging it on to greater speed. Muscles ridged along his swollen jaw and Zander's teeth were clamped so tightly they hurt. There was only one thought in his mind, now, and that was to get the man who had caused all this. Zander had no doubt that the riders from Sage City would catch him, in time; but he prayed that wouldn't be before he caught up to Irish.

It was three miles farther on that Zander, loping over a rise of ground caught sight of another rider several hundred yards ahead. He whipped the sixgun from his belt and urged the big gray harder. Topping the next rise, Zander saw that he was gaining. Irish was now less than a hundred yards ahead of him. Zander whipped out a shot, then looked back and saw that the posse out after him were closer, gaining, too.

When Zander cut loose again with the bone-handled six, he was only about fifty yards from Irish. He saw the puff of smoke from the hard-riding figure ahead of him, heard the whine of the hot lead over his head, just as his own weapon thundered. Then he saw Irish's mount stumble, pitch his rider over his head. Irish rolled, staggered to his feet and running, whipped a shot back over his shoulder at Zander, who was just reining in.

There was a pain as if from the touch of a hot branding iron at Zander's left shoulder and he looked down, saw, through the ripped sleeve, the puncture in his flesh, the little round hole, oozing purplish blood. That whole side slowly started to numb. When he looked up again, Zander saw that Irish was out of sight. There was a row of three jutting rocks off to the right of the trail. A flash of flame speared from behind one of them where Irish was barricaded and the slug sang past Zander's ear.

He flung himself flat, wriggled through the knee-high grass. Another shot from Irish's .44 whipped through the grass a foot from Zander's face. He raised up and fired toward the rocks, even though Irish wasn't in sight, to keep the other man back, keep him from shooting, while Zander, himself, inched another few feet forward.

Zander finally wriggled about ten yards from the rocks that shielded Irish and when there wasn't another shot forthcoming, he rushed, crouched

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low, bobbing and weaving, toward the other man's barricade, his sixgun raised, ready. But he didn't have to use it, he saw. Irish was sprawled on his back, his legs doubled up under him. A slug, ricocheting off the rocks had torn through the back of his skull.

Sighing tiredly, Zander turned, started to run toward the spot where he'd ground-hitched the big gray. He'd only taken a few steps when the group of riders from town, still carrying their loops of rope, rode thundering onto the scene. Zander stumbled, fell sprawling on his face, tasting dirt in his mouth. Pain lanced all through his right side and waves of crimson seemed to roll over him. He tried to rise but it was as though a great weight was holding him pinned to the ground. Finally, it seemed, this weight, to press him right into the ground itself, down and down into the dark earth and he was smothering there and knew that he was dying and on his way down into hell. He wondered vaguely what Val and Lucia Duchaine would have to say to him...

THERE WERE soft, cooling hands upon Zander's brow and the face of an angel looking down onto him, when Zander came to and he grinned weakly, murmured: "I reckon I must've got my directions crossed. This isn't Hades, after all; it's heaven!"

His hands felt for the clouds he seemed to be floating on and recognized after a moment that they weren't clouds but crisp, clean white sheets—which was just about as good. He tried to stretch and was brought up sharp by the pain spasm that wrenched at his shoulder. He put his hand there and felt the place wadded with bandages. The angel said: "Easy, Kris! You won't be able to rise and start hoppin' for a spell, yet. You always were a man hard to hold down to one place!"

The blur cleared from Zander's eyes, then and he saw that the angel was a woman a few years younger than himself, with flushed, soft-looking cheeks, the largest, most violet colored eyes he'd ever seen, all framed by a halo of pure gold hair. At the same time he recognized her; she was Ellen Samuels, who had been Tom Mackin's sweetheart before Zander had been sent away. The smile fell from Zander's lips, remembering this; he knew that this woman still believed that he had killed Tom and no tellin' what else about him.

"Before you start reckonin' a lot o' loco things, Mr. Kris Zander," she told him softly. "Let me pass on some news. You're clear o' the bank hold-up, Kris, and everything that happened afterward—save shootin' that man called Irish. But I don't figger anybody'll hold that against you. Val Duchaine did that for you, Kris, just before he died. He wasn't quite dead when the posse got to him in his office; he spieled the whole thing. And at the same time, knowin' he was goin', he gave everybody the straight of it the time my—Tom was backshot. Everyone knows now, Kris, that you weren't guilty of that."

He lay there, thinking all this over and looking up at Ellen Samuels, marveling at how little eight years had aged her, and that if anything, she was more beautiful than he remembered her being. He started to say something but she stopped him. Her cool hand passed over his forehead again and she said: "Hush, now, and get back to sleep. There'll be plenty of time to—to talk, later. You've got to hurry and get well, Kris. Sage City's goin' to need a man like you, to help pull it out of the mess that Duchaine's got it into."

Zander started to ask her if that was the only reason that she wanted him to hurry and get well. But he could tell by the expression in her eyes as she smiled and looked down on him, that it wasn't.

★

DINEH!

TRUE FACT FEATURE

By Lauran Paine

"DINEH" is the Navajo Indians' name for themselves as a tribe. It means "The People". "Navajo" was given the Dineh by the Spaniards and it has stuck down through the ages. In fact, the Dineh themselves will be the first to say that they are "Navajos". Not because the name is a source of pride to them, but because they find the trouble of explaining the error too involved and wearisome.

Naturally, the interpretation of their correct name, in their own tongue, implies a contended superiority over other tribes. To the Dineh this implication is quite correct they feel that they are superior and that other native Americans are less intelligent and not so well-descended as the Dineh.

The Navajos *are* fundamentally different from other Indian tribes and several apparently-inexplicable factors make this rather obvious. In the first place, Navajos sunburn as easily as Whites and their skin does not have the coppery pigment common in almost all other Indians; in fact, Navajo women often carry parasols, or other coverings, to protect themselves from the fury of the sun that swelters throughout their Reservation. In the second place, Navajo skin is not only lighter-colored but also finer

textured and their features have little in common with other Southwestern Indians.

The Navajo language is almost impossible for a mature "white" to learn, and differs radically from other Indian tongues—with the exception of the Apache, who is apparently an offshoot of the Dineh. There are several tribes of Upper Canada and Alaska who speak a language very similar to Navajo.

In Navajo there are no swear-words, "coyote" being as near to it as one can come, and this term is one of contempt rather than profanity. Because of this peculiarity, "The People" must employ a lot of imagination in being derogatory for—unlike English, which employs a bevy of four-letter words for cussing—the Navajo must make up whole connected sentences of descriptive words.

An interesting sidelight on the Navajo language is the fact that, during World War II, Navajo soldiers were trained to send and receive messages in their own language; these were never deciphered by the enemies of America and her Allies. Unlike most other American Indians, the Dineh do not use sign-language, or talk with hand and arm motions. This art is highly developed among Northwestern Indians, but in the Southwest the aboriginal Americans do not use their hands to talk with any more then the average "white" does.

Many Indians of the Southwest understand and speak Navajo, but the Dineh themselves seldom learn or speak any other language—and this includes English. In fact, a census taken in 1948 showed that, out of better then 60,000 Navajos only one third could speak, read or write English. Their language is complete to the extent that Navajos seldom have to borrow a Spanish or English word for their own use. As an example: over two-hundred seperate parts of an automobile can be identified by the Navajos in their own tongue, likewise, the Navajo can express some very complicated phrases and thoughts by the use of a single word. But, as with German, the Navajos have had to combine words to describe things foreign to them—such as "negro", which is "black Mexican" in Dineh.

The Navajo is, by count, the largest Indian tribe in America today, numbering well over sixty-thousand. This is undoubtedly the result of an early adoption of a policy of trading with "whites" rather then constantly warring with them. The Navajos are an industrious people, and no other American Indian can approach them for ability to create articles of commercial value to "whites" as they do. They are fair farmers, excellent herdsmen and livestock raises, rug makers without equal and outstanding silversmiths.

In the old days they were cordially hated by most of the nomadic tribes because of their peaceful and industrious traits, although history relates many incidents of Navajo fury and fighting ability when the Dineh were attacked or wronged; but on the whole the Dineh have been a quiet, self contained and industrious people, deeply religious and thoughtful.

THE NAVAJO Reservation is about eighteen-million acres or rough land and has been increased many times since it was first established in 1868 until now it is over five times it's original size. Because of the vastness of this Reservation there are many Navajos who, to this day, have never ridden in an automobile. An even better example of the size of this Reservation and its remoteness is the fact that Navajos have less contact with "whites" than any other American Indian tribe and there are many isolated areas that have only been seen by "whites" once or twice since the Reservation was established, almost a hundred years ago.

With all its size and roughness, if the natural resources of the Navajo Indian Reservation were developed, the Dineh would be the wealthiest

Indians in the world today. The government knows the extent of these resources and the location, but it does nothing about them except mine uranium—which it needs to build bombs; but as far as developing the rich silver and gold deposits that are known to exist, or resurrecting the old copper mines, or making use of the crude oil that is so rich it can be used without refining, the government hasn't been interested. It has rather let the Dineh straggle along with a hovel for a home, and a diet of mutton for sustenance, then develop their resources and let them live as free Americans—without corrupt Indian agents, ridiculous government regulations, policies that grind them down in poverty.

Navajos as a people can teach the world much. They are hospitable, friendly and full of fun. Naturally these traits are not apparent to the average "turista", but then a tourist seldom learns anything, or sees the best anyway. Navajos are great practical-jokers and dearly love a joke—whether it is upon themselves or some one else. They seldom have feuds or fights for the simple reason that it is a sin among the Dineh to lose your temper.

In the old days, the Dineh very rarely scalped a foe and never resorted to torture of captives or enemies. Their slaves were given jobs to do around their camps and homes, but were not treated as undesireables or inferiors unless they proved treacherous; they were treated as equals. Since no caste system ever existed in the tribe, the Dineh were a very democratic people, long before the coming of the "whites," and still are.

Navajos are very reserved and almost never talkative. For this reason they are often described as "taciturn, "resentful" or "phlegmatic". This is far from the truth; the Dineh are for the most part full-blooded, but only because they are such a large tribe—not because of any archaic or false standards. Inter-marriage among Peublos, their closest neighbors and also a peaceful people, has of late years increased greatly. Standards and customs of the tribe are perfectly amenable to inter-marriage of Navajos with other Indian tribes, "whites" or Mexicans. The offsprings of such unions are accorded the same recognition and treatment as full-bloods. Dineh tribal customs differentiate among people only as individuals. If a man is honest and truthful, he is respected regardless of his origin; this even applies to the Utes, hereditary enemies of the Dineh—while a full-blood Navajo, who may lack the attributes considered essential in a man, is looked down upon in spite of his descent.

A NAVAJO is governed by his own tribal codes rather than by any laws of the "whites". No Navajo will knowingly break a "white law," but in cases of doubt he will revert to his own customs; often, there is a clash of legalities, the Dineh naturally prefer and abide by their own laws. Most Navajos are law-abiding, but occasionally, when a "white" law is ridiculous, or considered non-applicable, the Dineh ignore it.

The Dineh, while a reserved people in public and with strangers, have many touching little traits that make the knowledge of their burdens and their ways deeply appreciated by those who know them. It is not unusual to see these people weep quietly on one another's shoulders. This happens between both sexes, when they have not seen each other for a long time or when a dear one has recently died. Men and women do not kiss one another, but a quick look of adoration, or a furtive touching of one another, achieves the same ends. When an outsider happens to see one of these little amorous glances he should ignore it completely—since obviously he had no business seeing it—and instantly avert his gaze; under no circumstances should he comment on it, either seriously or in fun.

Navajos do not shake hands like "whites", with an upwards and down-

wards motion; they clasp hands gently and hold one another's hands for a short length of time, depending on how long it has been since they have last seen each other. It is extremely bad manners with the Dineh to grip a hand with force, as with "whites", but the difference is that the Navajos never do it, while the "whites" do it too often.

Navajo introductions are formal, but if you want to know a Navajo without an introduction you never ask him his name; Navajos consider it bad manners to ask pointed or direct questions. Ask some other Navajo the name of the man you want to know then address him by his name as though you already knew him. In speaking, Navajos seldom look into the eyes of the speaker; they will watch the lips, but staring into the eyes is considered bad manners. If you have something to offer a Navajo do not point it at him, such as a cigaret; point the tendered object toward the sky or the earth but never directly at the Indian. This peculiarity extends to almost anything. When a Navajo comes to a stick on the trail that is pointing directly at him he will side-step, or when a group of men are standing around talking and one of them drops a stick the group immediately moves out of the direct line of the thing.

Since Navajos never made arrowheads, and obtained them through bartering with other tribesmen, these arrowheads had a fair value; but if a Navajo found one lying on the ground, pointing in his direction, he would not only refuse to pick it up, but would ignore it and walk away.

The Dineh, being a reserved and tolerant race, seldom have marital troubles; but when they do the divorce ritual is very simple. All the Navajo woman has to do is place her husband's saddle outside the hogan and they are divorced. If the man is the outraged member of the union he simply gathers up his personal affects and rides off.

One time, a few years ago, the author got involved in a horse-race with a Navajo buck in the Arizona Strip—roughly forty miles or so South of Saint George, Utah, and about twenty-five or thirty miles West of the Grand Canyon. The Navajo lost the race and seemed to enjoy losing. Subsequent study of these highy-intelligent people disclosed the odd fact that they actually do not care whether they lose or win when they gamble; the thrill of the moment is of much more importance to them then the outcome. Cheating, as the "whites" know it, is considered not only ethical but admirable provided the trick is not detected; if the deceiver is detected, he must forfeit the pot or wager.

NAVAJO women, while not considered "proper", in the old days, if they sang or whistled, do so today when and where the spirit moves them, although never as loudly or as frequently as the men. Singing with the Dineh, as with most American Indians, has a special significance and is part of all of their celebrations, religious and otherwise.

Dineh children are taught respect for their elders, to be truthful regardless of the consequences, to work hard and industriously and to be moral; in fact, boys are told that if they look upon naked girls they may lose their eyesight. To teach their children respect and sympathy for living creatures, Navajo children are given dogs, lambs and especially baby goats for pets instead of dolls. The Navajos, unlike most Plains Indians, do not discriminate between male and female children; each share and share alike. When Dineh girls become of marrying age they are not bartered off, as is a common practice with other tribes, but are allowed to pick their own mates. Marriage plans are usually talked over among the elders with the boy and girl present. The parents of the girl usually are particular about her choice of a husband in only one regard; that is how many poor relations the man has.

Navajo women were "emancipated"

long before the coming of the ancestors of Cary Nation. They were allowed to speak out at Councils, an unheard-of liberty among both "whites" and Indians a hundred years ago. They are the undisputed "bosses" around their home, or hogan, and own most of the herds of sheeps and goats while men own the horses and the cattle.

For all their domesticity, the Navajos are among the best trackers in the world and in tracking fugitives, or lost tourists, can travel so fast on the trail that an ordinary tracker cannot begin to keep up with them. This art is so highly developed among them that they make it a point to know the track of their own horses, family and friends. This, incidentally, is no mean accomplishment on a Reservation where rock and shale form a great part of most of the traveled byways.

In childbirth, the Navajo woman half-sits and remains fully clothed; she is attended usually by a medicine man and an old woman, both of whom specialize in delivering children. The Dineh practised birth-control long before the coming of the Conquistadores and, to this day, practice it in some cases; while children are always welcomed and looked forward to, the Dineh recognise too that some physical abnormalities can be transmitted from parent to child.

Navajos do not fear dying; in fact they have a beautiful and fatalistic legend about it. But they do fear dead people, just as they fear the dark, and once life has left a body they will forever avoid traveling near the spot where someone has died. Death by lightning is the most feared way of dying a Navajo can imagine. If the Dineh have absolute knowledge that lightning has struck some particular spot they will never visit it or plant anything on it. However, if a Navajo is struck by lightning and lives through the ordeal, he is said to be immune to almost any form of violent death and safe from almost any taboo. When a Navajo is dead and ready for burial, his clothes are put on backwards; this is believed to confuse the evil spirit that might have in mind following him to Heaven. Many valuables and personal affects are buried with a dead Navajo; but it is believed that if weapons are buried with the dead man, he might defile Heaven by fighting someone and thereby disgrace the name of the entire tribe.

The great legends of the Dineh are more fascinating then the most extravagant writings of the Anglo-Saxon, world and rival anything that Egypt or Araby can produce for mythological grandeur. Their stories are at once beautiful, full of pathos and wisdom, suffering and triumph; seldom does a "white" hear one of them that the legend does not stay clear in his mind through the years, as unforgettable as anything he ever hears.

No Navajo ever whistles after dark... If a man tells a lie three times; he can be excused but if he tells it the fourth time he will be surrounded by its evil influence... If a Navajo spills some water upon the ground, and it runs toward him, he must hastily move out of its path... Navajos do everything clockwise, which to them is sunwise; this includes drawing a circle, stirring food in a pan on the stove, building a corral, making sand paintings or planting their meagre crops... A blue bird flying over a Navajo's hogan is a sure symbol of good fortune to come.

The Dineh are a great and sagacious people; their origin, like the origin of so many things on earth, is shrouded in mystery and darkness; but down through the eons of time—since they looked up and beheld themselves no longer bound beneath the earth—they have steadily come forward in their culture, which is every bit as intelligent and inspiring as "white" culture—and more so in religion and tolerance, to which the "whites" only pay lip service. In their own way they are great and good and wise, inferior to none, equal to any and superior to most; they are in fact what they themselves say—*"Dineh! The People!"*

There was no fight left in the rustlers.

TRAIL TO SAND SPRINGS

Feature Novel of Triggerfast Wits

BY CLYDE HARPER

● ★ ●

"You're licked, Kirby; the note on the Box K is due in three days, and you can't sell any stock to raise the dough—that stock is mortgaged, too, and you can't touch it!"

● ★ ●

JUST THREE days after he received the letter, Buck Kirby rode into Sand Springs. Trail-dust flecked his clothing and horse, but there was none on his Colt; he had carefully kept that clean all the way from Texas.

He dismounted before the town's only restaurant. Behind the counter a man of about Buck's own age nodded a greeting. "Are you Russ Baker?"

"Yep. What can I do for you?"

"I got your letter, I'm Buck Kirby."

"Well. Glad to know you, Buck." Baker extended his hand.

They shook hands and Kirby took a stool at the counter. He asked slowly: "How was he killed?"

"It was an accident, Buck; his horse tripped and fell on him. But the reason I wrote you to hurry is that you're..."

Baker stopped as two men entered the place. They were wiry range-veterans, each armed. They avoided Kirby's casual glance. Although there were other stools available, they deliberately chose seats on either side of Kirby. Buck's eyes narrowed, cautiously.

"Coffee," the man on Kirby's left said to Baker.

"Me, too," added the other.

Baker brought the coffee and shoved canned cream and the sugar bowl along the counter. The man on Kirby's left helped himself to the sugar. "Pass it, will you?" It was the man on Kirby's right, asking for the sugar.

As Kirby reached to pass it, both men pressed toward him; they appeared trying to squeeze against him, to foul his gun so he couldn't draw. In a flash, Kirby kicked against the wooden counter, thrust himself backward off the stool. He landed catlike, poised, taut. "Now, you hombres..."

He got no further.

The front screen door banged open, a feminine cry rang out, and a sack of vegetables, struck Kirby. The paper bag split under the impact, and a cabbage knocked off Kirby's hat. Potatoes and onions showered his shoulders.

"Grab his gun, grab his gun!" cried the enraged voice. Its owner tried to set an example; she seized Buck's gun-arm, clung fiercely.

Under the onslaught, Kirby fell back. Open-mouthed he stared, dumbfounded by the unexpected barrage and attack.

It was over as suddenly as it had begun. The two men left their stools, laughing; they grabbed and held the girl. Behind the counter, Russ Baker was also laughing. "Julie, Julie!" Baker's voice penetrated and quieted the hubbub. "Julie, this is Buck Kirby. There wouldn't have been any trouble; Pop and Mike were just hoorawing Buck a bit. They'd have told him the next instant, if you hadn't started such a commotion."

Pop and Mike released her, still chuckling. Julie realized they were laughing at her, at the commotion she'd caused. Well, it *had* looked through the screen door like a stranger was about to draw. She'd thrown caution aside, leaped to help her brother and friends. Now they were laughing at her. Even the stranger...not a stranger any longer ...was beginning to grin.

Red-faced, Julie hurried into the kitchen. She did not return, not even to pick up the scattered vegetables. Russ came around to do that, gathering them into his apron.

One of the others spoke. "Guess we'd better get acquainted, Buck. I'm Pop Conroy and this is Mike Malone; we've been at th' Box K ever since your Uncle Ben started ranchin' in this valley."

They reminded Buck of gnarled hill pines...small and tough. Long days in the sun had baked their skins brown, put crow's feet wrinkles at corners of keen eyes. They were about the same age, same stature, but there the similiarity ended. Pop was as bald as an egg except for a fringe of sandy-gray hair; Mike had thick hair and a bristling mustache.

It was bald-headed Pop Conroy who retrieved Buck's hat and handed it to him. "Now let's all have a cup of coffee," Pop said.

SEATED at the counter, Pop again took up the conversation. "Besides Mike an' me, there's four more out at th' Box K, Buck. When they're

in a good humor, they call me th' foreman; when they ain't in a good humor, they..." Pop didn't finish.

A man flung open the screen door and came toward them. He was well-dressed, powerfully-built. He had the manner of a man who knew what he wanted, and how to get it. His gaze swept the others, centered on the newcomer. "You Buck Kirby?" His voice held an arrogant tone.

"You probably knew that before you came in here." Buck was irritated by the insolent glint in the man's eyes, and by his voice. "So...what's on your mind, mister?"

"Your uncle died owing me five thousand dollars." A smirk touched Lafe Luker's face. "He put up the Box K as security. The note's due in four days; pay by then, or I'm taking over."

He turned and strode from the restaurant.

Kirby stared after him, rubbing his chin reflectively. After a few moments he asked: "That right, fellows?"

"Guess so," grumbled Pop Conroy. "Luker has th' note, all right. Your uncle borrowed th' money from th' bank, but Luker schemed some way to git hold of th' note."

"That's why I wrote you to hurry, Buck," said Russ Baker. "Don't none of us want to see Luker get the Box K."

Buck slowly built and lighted a cigarette, rolling the problem around in his mind. "That's a tall order—five thousand dollars in four days. I've got a thousand I've managed to save, but that's still four thousand short."

Mike Malone gave his mustache a pugnacious twitch. "We'd all help, Buck, if we could. But I reckon all of us put together couldn't round up five hundred."

"Yeah, I know how it is," said Buck appreciatively. "Well, let's get out to th' ranch; I've got some figurin' to do."

As the two Box K hands followed their new boss outside, Pop said somberly: "You can't borrow it at th' bank. Old man Abee is tougher'n hell; he made yore Uncle Ben put up th' whole ranch for just that measly five thousand!"

They went to their horses. But before they could mount, a man approached them. He was timidly poised to slink away if the three showed the slightest displeasure at his presence.

"What is it, Zanto?" Mike's tone was gentle, and Zanto visibly brightened. He was badly scarred about the face, and what was meant to be a smile was almost a leer. "Me show?" he asked hopefully.

"Not today," said Pop; "we ain't got time."

"Me show to heem?" It was a plea, as he indicated Buck. "Heem never see; me be queeck."

The humble, eager appeal tempered Kirby's impatience to get to the ranch. He nodded assent. "Sure, feller. We'll take time."

Buck's agreement magically affected the other. Zanto swept off his battered hat with a flourish like that of a talented stage performer. He straightened, his cringing timidity suddenly transformed into muscular grace.

Deftly, he brought four long-bladed throwing-knives from inside his tat-

tered shirt. They were of finest material and craftsmanship. The way he fondled them showed they meant much to this poor, scarred, humble man.

He faced the wooden front of the restaurant, assumed the stance worthy of a great artist. And such, now, was Zanto.

ONLY THE fraction of a moment Zanto held his pose; then his hands flicked, one at a time. Two gleaming knives sped for the wall, thudded softly into the wood beneath the front window. Next Zanto simultaneously threw with both hands. The second pair of knives went directly beneath the first two, as evenly spaced as if by a measuring device.

Now Zanto was the accomplished man of talent, throwing sideways, backward, with either hand, or with both hands. He splintered a match at ten paces, severed a piece of string Pop and Mike obligingly held against the wall. Then Zanto took a playing card from his pocket. He fastened it against the wall on a splinter, stepped away a dozen paces. He put away two of the knives, retained two, one in each hand. He turned his back to the wall, hands hanging loosely.

"You say when?" he asked of Mike Malone.

Mike nodded, waited. Suddenly he called: "Now!"

Swiftly Zanto whirled, both hands leaping. Two streaks of metal sped for the wall. As one, the knives hit, points buried, hilts quivering. Both were in the center of the card, points not an inch apart. It was Zanto's crowning climax.

"I've seen him do it a hundred times," Pop told Buck, "an' he always puts 'em both in th' middle; wouldn't want him mad at me!"

As Zanto got his knives and replaced them inside his shirt, his confidence dropped from him like a mantle; he stared laxly at his scuffed moccasins.

Pop and Mike reached for coins, but Kirby held up a restraining hand. "This was for me." Kirby extended Zanto a silver dollar. "I've seen considerable knife throwing, amigo, but you're th' best."

Zanto took the coin, head bobbing his thanks. His appreciation was great—rarely did he get a silver dollar. But of more importance to Zanto was that the stranger had called him "friend."

"Poor devil," said Pop as they rode out of town. "That's his first dollar in no tellin' how long; it'll make him your amigo, all right."

"How'd he get his scars?" asked Buck.

"Quite a story," said Pop. "He used to be foreman for a big layout down in Mexico. Five hombres tried to rob and pillage th' place, but Zanto held them off while th' boss and his family escaped. Then he ran out of ammunition, and th' bandits carved him up just for th' hell of it because he'd upset their plans. They left him to die, but he crawled off to himself, doctored and healed his wounds. Then he hunted down th' five—killed every one with his knives just like you saw him throw 'em today. His boss offered him a life-time job, but I guess them scars went deeper'n his face. Zanto lives off to himself. He keeps Russ an' Julie in cook wood for enough to eat, picks up spending money by giving his knife-throwing act."

"He's as fast with them knives," declared Mike Malone, "as any gunslinger I've ever seen. Well, Buck, just over that next ridge is th' Box K —biggest ranch in th' state. All yours if you can keep Luker's claws away."

They spurred a bit faster, topped the knoll, drew rein.

"This is it, Buck," said Pop. "Th' Box K as far as you can see, except a little hunk way up in th' northwest corner. A feller named Monk Tarker has a two-bit hill ranch up there. Well, Buck, what d'ye think of it?"

2

IT WAS THE first time Buck Kirby had ever looked at the Box K. As a kid, he often heard his parents talk of this ranch and the man who owned it—his father's brother. Once, when Buck was just past eighteen, Uncle Ben had come on a short visit to them down in Texas. He'd brought Buck a new hat and a Colt sixgun; it was the same gun Buck wore now.

When his folks died a few years later, Kirby wrote his uncle each time. Uncle Ben hadn't come for the funerals, since they were already over by the time the letters arrived. But he had written, the first time to express his regret and sympathy to Buck and his dad when Kirby's mother had gone; the second time, after Kirby's father had died, to invite Buck to come and live on the Box K. Buck wrote his thanks, stayed on in Texas, and kept saving toward the day when he'd own his own spread. Now, five years later, he was sitting there at the south boundary of the Box K, about to ride down and take charge.

The valley was wide, grassy, well-sheltered on the east and west by timber-cloaked heights. About midway between these was the Box K ranchhouse, corral, bunkhouse, and a half-dozen fenced-in stacks of hay for winter feed. On northward were scattered groups of grazing cattle. Far up the valley, so far that they were mere glinting dots in the afternoon sun, were two structures. One was at the foot of the east mountains, the other at the foot of the west heights.

"Galvanized hay barns to store winter feed in," explained Pop, noting Buck's scrutiny. "One for th' east slope, one for th' west slope. Set close to th' hills to afford a windbreak when winter comes. Cost over two thousand each; that's what your uncle borrowed th' five thousand for. He'd paid it back easy this fall if th' bank had kept th' note. I reckon Luker offered such a fancy profit for it that old money-mad Abee just couldn't resist sellin'. Well, Buck, come on an' meet the rest of the boys."

They rode to the ranchhouse, skirting it to go to the little knot of men gathered at the bunkhouse. Pop was last to dismount.

"This is Buck, fellers, your new boss. Buck, meet Pete Parker, Jess Davis, Shorty Harmon, an' Candy Hicks. We call him Candy 'cause he eats more sweets than a kid."

The young, range-hardened top-hands matched Buck's steady gaze, returned his firm handshake—Candy grinning and embarrassed.

"I'm not used to making speeches, so I won't try," Buck told them quietly. "You fellers know th' set-up as well as I do. Luker has a note for five thousand, with Box K as security; that note is due in four days.

"I've got a thousand I've saved up, an' figure the only way to raise the other four thousand is sell some of the Box K beef pronto. Where's th' closest cattle buyer?"

The boys stared blankly for a moment. They had expected action when the new boss arrived, but not this quickly; they looked at each other, startled, as they digested the trend of his plan. Then big grins of eager approval came to their faces.

"About a day's drive north," beamed Pop. "But we might push 'em and make it quicker."

"It'll be a little tough drivin' at night," said Buck, "but we've got to get that money in a hurry. Can we round up a herd and have them ready to start by dark?"

"You b...bet we can," stammered Candy. "Shorty an' me were up in th'

north end this morning. They's about two hundred head o' prime stuff there that any cattle-buyer would be glad to have; we kin have 'em on th' trail in an hour."

"Good! We'll put some grub under our belts and get started pronto. Pop, let's go see what we can stir up to eat."

The cowhands bustled away, noisily discussing the drive ahead. Buck and Pop went toward the house, around to the front porch. Pop drew up, startled. "We've got visitors—that dam' Luker an' his pea-brained Sheriff!"

The two riders came on to the house. Lafe Luker dismounted and swaggered up toward them, and a great blob of a man clumsily lowered his immense hulk from the saddle.

BUCK'S EYES grew steely and his square jaw jutted as he silently viewed the two. Pop spat a string of highly colorful description.

Ignoring the outraged foreman, Luker addressed Kirby in a tone thick with malicious sarcasm. "I came out to tell you, Kirby, that if you're planning what I think you are, don't do it!" Luker glanced significantly toward the corral where the boys were saddling up. "The security on that note is the Box K—lock, stock and barrel. You oughta know you can't move mortgaged property. An' to see that you don't, Sheriff Pearson will stick around until I move in."

With a suddenness that caught them all unaware, Kirby's right hand flashed down. His Colt roared twice—the two shots almost as one. Twin geyers of sand erupted near Luker's feet, one at either toe. Then Kirby lifted his gun and waved the smoke from its barrel. "Ants was about to crawl on your feet," said Kirby gently. "They can get mad if they get riled up enough—just like some men!"

With a quick thrust Kirby reholstered his gun, and a hard grin tightened his lips. "Now, Mister Luker, did you have anything else to say?"

Big Lafe Luker had paled as the bullets tore the ground at his feet. His face was an angry red now, and for an instant he seemed about to go for his gun.

Pop Conroy's gnarled right hand crept toward his Colt, and unholy glee was in his bright eyes as he pugnaciously faced the fat sheriff. Activity had stopped in the corral, and the boys watched and listened. Little Mike Malone edged over the top rail, mustache bristling like the ruff on an angered lion.

But Luker fought down his murderous anger, and mockery came into his voice. "I've got you licked, Kirby, so I'm not going to draw. I'll just wait four days and watch you crawl off. Fred, you stay and see that he doesn't try to sell property that's mortgaged to me; you're whipped, Kirby!"

With that, Luker turned to his horse, mounted, and rode away.

Drawing the irate little foreman aside so the sheriff couldn't hear, Buck asked softly: "Tell me, Pop, how many friendly ranchers are there hereabouts?"

"I reckon six like Box K all right. Why?"

"Let's go to the bunkhouse."

As if at a pre-arranged signal, Mike closed the bunkhouse door behind Buck, and stationed himself near one of the windows where he could

keep an eye on the obviously perturbed sheriff at the ranchhouse porch.

Buck started speaking at once. "You all saw an' heard everything. According to law, Luker can keep us from selling Box K beef—but he can't stop us from borrowing cattle from our friends!"

A mutter of excitement arose as Buck hurried on. "Pop says there's six ranchers in this section friendly toward Box K. We want at least twenty head from each ranch. There's six of you, including Pop and Mike. Each of you pick a ranch where you think you can borrow twenty head of prime stuff, then go borrow them!"

"Son of a gun!" exclaimed red-headed Jess Davis. "What d'ye think of that!"

NOBODY answered, for Pete Parker had hurried to his bunk, jerked his Colt off a wall hook. Instantly the other three followed his lead, and there was a flurry of guns and holsters. Then, eager to be off, they turned back to Buck. "I'll see old man Jackson," said Pete; "I maybe kin get twenty-five head from him."

"I'll take th' Double-Diamond," remarked Shorty. "Hell, I know I can git twenty head there!"

"You oughta git fifty, er maybe you're slippin'," Candy said dryly, grinning at Buck. "Shorty thinks he's about to throw a hobble on th' Double-Diamond filly; we think she's got too much sense for that."

They laughed a little at Shorty's discomfort. Then the others announced their selection of neighboring ranchers to call on. "Sounds good," said Buck heartily. "I'll stick around here to entertain the sheriff. Try to get back by dark. Bunch your stuff in the corral; we'll water it, then head north right after supper."

"Best that we do leave after dark," nodded Mike Malone. "If it was daytime, Monk Tarker would likely see us, an' we might have a argument on our hands."

"Why?" Buck asked quickly.

It was Pop who answered. "Every rancher in this section figures he has been long-looped from time to time. They ain't no proof, but Tarker's place up in them hills is just dandy for that."

"Well, we'll just have to worry about Tarker when th' time comes—if it does," said Buck. "You fellers pick out stuff you think can stand a stiff pace. Tell the ranchers we'll pay them top market price for every head we borrow in a few weeks. Shorty, if you can get more than twenty head, you do it even if th' boys do josh you. Should we have a run-in with Tarker, we might need a few extras. Ride your own horses an' use your own gear, so the sheriff can't have a loophole to arrest us for using Box K property. Be sure to get a bill of sale for the cattle you borrow so there won't be any delay in selling when we get to that cattle buyer. All right, fellers, hit leather now, an' get back quick as you can."

Pop Conroy opened the door and the eager punchers filed quickly out. The four youngsters hurried to the corral, made record time in roping and saddling their own private mounts. Then, all six headed for the neighboring ranches at a fast running-walk.

3

FRED PEARSON shifted his ponderous body in the chair and nervously wiped the sweat from his brow. A number of things contributed to his discomfort. The fact that he wore a sheriff's badge didn't make him feel too easy; he knew he was unpopular with the Box K men,

particularly garrulous Pop Conroy. He wished he dared ride back to town. But Luker had told him to stay, and keep an eye on the Box K; Luker had promised to treat him right when he got the ranch. Until Luker had maneuvered him into the sheriff's office, Pearson had lived as easily as possible; he wasn't used to opposing men like Kirby and the Box K riders, and he wished that Luker hadn't left him alone.

The sheriff was suddenly startled as Kirby unobtrusively appeared around the corner of the porch. He started to arise from his chair.

"Keep your seat." Kirby's voice was amiable enough, but to the nervous sheriff it sounded like a command. Kirby sat on the steps and casually rolled a cigarette.

"Where...where them others gone?" Pearson tried to make his voice strong and calm, and failed.

"They'll be back," said Kirby quietly.

The fat sheriff flushed, realizing Kirby was telling him it was none of his business. He wondered if he shouldn't go warn Luker the Box K was up to something. Kirby's actions in shooting at the "ants" had told he wouldn't take a licking without fighting back. Suddenly Pearson knew things were going to happen, soon; for one thing, the Box K boys had ridden hurriedly away as if to pre-determined destinations; for another the quiet, calm manner in which Buck Kirby sat there smoking. It was like the lull before a storm.

Big Fred Pearson swallowed and pulled himself out of his chair. Instantly Kirby's eyes were on him. "I ...I've gotta go!" Pearson tried to keep the trembling from his voice.

"Sit down, Pearson!" Kirby's voice was quiet, but there was no doubting its commanding tone. "I have no quarrel with you unless you make one; but you're not going to Luker, so sit down."

Fred Pearson feared violence more than he detested work. He sagged back into his chair, sweating. For hours it seemed to him, they sat there; Kirby silent and watchful, Pearson increasingly nervous and worried.

Pearson first saw the dust-plume of a rider coming from town. He straightened eagerly, hoping it was Luker. But recognizing the visitor, Pearson slumped back into his chair.

The girl didn't seem surprised at the lack of greeting, for Kirby didn't trust the fat sheriff enough to take his eyes away. Julie Baker dismounted, came to the steps so Kirby could glance at her without losing observance of Pearson. She understood the situation. "I've come to apologize," she smiled.

"You needn't." Buck liked the friendliness in her eyes. "You were just trying to help your friends; anyone would have done th' same."

She rested one foot on the edge of a step. "Russ and I both thought an awful lot of your Uncle. Tell me, is there anything I can do to help?"

Buck started to shake his head, then decided that she could. "The Box K boys will be in about dark, hungry as bears. You might fix some supper, if you've got time, or don't have to go back and help Russ."

"He's coming out later. I'll be glad to fix supper; it won't be the first meal I've cooked out here." She flung the latter over her shoulder as she was already going for the kitchen. Soon Buck could hear her moving about, building a fire, rattling pots and pans.

DUSK WAS settling when Julie came back and sat down so Buck could see both her and Pearson. "Everything is ready. I found some dried apples, so there'll be apple pie to go with your coffee."

"That's the best news I've heard all day!"

She laughed, pleased, leaned against a post. "I like this place. Did you know Russ and I lived out here awhile?"

Not waiting for his reply, she chat-

ted on, telling Buck about herself and Russ. They had opened their restaurant three years ago, having come from Missouri, where Russ' health had gone bad. At that point, her gay laughter accompanied the comment that with his present ruddy cheeks and stout body, Russ didn't look like he'd ever been sick. During the first year when Russ was at his worst, Uncle Ben had persuaded Russ to come out and stay on the ranch where he could get lots of air and sunshine. Uncle Ben found a good Mexican woman to help in the restaurant, and talked up business among all residents in the valley. They had lost their parents when quite young, so she guessed that was why they had grown so fond of Uncle Ben. He had been wonderful to them—treated them as if they were his own kids. He'd taught them both how to ride and rope, and even handle guns. Just a year before he was killed, Uncle Ben had given her the little pony she now rode for a birthday present. Julie choked up a little as she told Buck of that, and he reckoned she had been pretty fond of Uncle Ben.

"But I've talked until your ears are worn off!" she lightly exclaimed. "Now you talk awhile. Tell me about yourself."

Buck Kirby grinned and shook his head. "I'm just a cowpoke who had a rich uncle; that's about all there is to tell."

Julie's laughter bubbled again. "Oh, is that so? You should have heard the way your Uncle raved about you. If he told me once, he told me a hundred times about how he offered you a partnership in the Box K after your father died, and how you turned it down to make your own way. That pleased Uncle Ben immensely, Buck; he said most other young men would have jumped at his offer."

"He must have been a fine man," stated Buck reflectively. "I reckon I should have come to visit him a time or two, since we were the last of the Kirby clan left. You know, Ma'am, I sort of feel bad about being his only heir. He worked hard all his life, building up th' Box K, and all I do is move in and become a rich man. I don't deserve it. He should have left it to you and Russ, or Pop and Mike. All of you have done more for him than I have."

"Don't talk like that, Buck! You've done more for him than you think. You've made him live his youth over again, made him proud of you. Oh, don't try to stop me! Even if he didn't see you but once in his lifetime, he knew as much about you as if you'd lived right here. Everytime anyone from Texas came along, Uncle Ben asked if they knew you, or knew about you. And if they did, Uncle Ben talked them dry. Then he went around for days, bragging about how well you were getting along, how you were saving your money. He relived his life in you, Buck, for Uncle Ben started out on his own when he was a young man, just like you. He knew you were learning to take care of things which you'd worked for yourself. That's why he knew you'd take care of the Box K."

HER VOICE was vibrant, intense. It caused a strange warmth to creep through Buck. He wanted to look at her, to see into her eyes. But he kept his gaze on Pearson, told himself this strange feeling would pass. People just didn't meet with a smile and a pleasant hello, then walk off together, hand-in-hand. They had to know each other awhile, discover similar tastes and dislikes, and understanding. These things were necessary to future contentment and happiness —like Buck's mother and father had had. But as he thought of that, Buck Kirby started. For his father, as a young man, enroute with a wagon-train from Ohio to West Texas, attended a harvest celebration at a little Tennessee town one Saturday where the waggoners stopped overnight. He danced with a gay young woman, a merchant's daughter, the queen of the ball. She invited Buck's dad to go to church with her next day. He did, but

when he left that afternoon to catch up with the wagon-train, the merchant's daughter went with him as his wife.

It had taken Buck's dad and mother less than twenty-four hours to understand each other. And as Buck sat there and listened to Julie's gay laughter, he knew that he would sometime ask her a question. He wanted now to look into her eyes, to see if he could get an inkling as to what her answer would be. But he wouldn't do that—yet.

Instead, he said gravely: "Thank you, Ma'am, for what you've said. I'm glad that you think that way."

"Oh, I'm not the only one who... who thinks that way!" She was suddenly aware she'd shown an interest stronger than she had intended, and she rushed on, hurriedly: "Pop and Mike and Russ think the same way. You can't fool a couple of wise old owls like Pop and Mike. They... Well! I'd better get busy. There come the boys. Tell them supper will be ready as soon as they are."

4

IT WAS dark by the time the cattle was herded into the corral, fed and watered. The boys fed their horses, then came toward the front porch.

"Supper will be ready in a few minutes," Buck told them. Then motioning to Pearson, Buck said: "We'll go inside; you first."

Pearson made no protest.

The boys washed up on the back porch, then trooped into the kitchen. They greeted Julie enthusiastically, especially when they saw the loaded table. Shorty was the last one to come inside. There was a triumphant grin on his homely face.

"Have any trouble?" Buck sat where he could watch the fat sheriff. He didn't expect Pearson to try anything, but he was taking no unnecessary chances.

"Got twenty-five head," said Pop Conroy, already at work on the ham and eggs. "Best they had."

"I got twenty." Pete, Jeff and Candy spoke almost as one.

"I coulda got a hundred," said little Mike Malone, "but I only found eighteen which I figgered could stand th' pace."

"You fellers ain't so hot," declared Shorty derisively.

Candy, Pete and Jeff gave a chorus of snorts. "I reckon you brought fifty?" said Pete, jeeringly.

"Nope. Could have..."

"Why didn't you? Finally found out you ain't so hot so far as th' Double Diamond is concerned, huh? I'll be surprised if you got ten."

Shorty took a gulp of coffee and chuckled. "Then you're surprised. I didn't stop at twenty— I got thirty head. Coulda brought fifty, but couldn't handle a drag that big. Now you smart-alecks laugh that off!"

His tormenters unsuccessfully tried to find words to erase Shorty's cocky grin. But little Mike Malone broke in solemnly. "We might need 'em. I saw Monk Tarker and a couple of his boys as I was comin' in with my drag. Tarker took one look, then high-tailed it to town; his two boys went on north. If I'm any judge, Tarker has gone to tell Luker, and sent his boys on to git ready for a nice big haul."

Kirby shrugged. "Maybe he won't be expecting us to start so soon. But if he does, we'll just have to take things as they come."

Julie's apple pie was received with lusty approval from all. The way they polished off the generous helpings was eloquent testimonial in itself, but each man added some word of praise, which heightened the color in Julie's cheeks.

"We'll help you with th' dishes," said Buck, as they finished.

"You'll get out of my way!" Julie flashed at him with a smile. "I've washed more than these lots of times

at the restaurant. Go into the other room and smoke, all of you."

They grinned, again voiced their thanks for the good meal, and left the kitchen. Mike Malone lighted a lamp, and they made cigarettes and smoked, while they waited for Buck to outline their next move.

"We'll finish our smoke," said Buck, "an' then we'll get the herd moving."

"What about him?" Pop Conroy jerked his head toward Pearson, who had kept silent, but attentive to every word that had been said. "He knows now what we're fixin' to do. Soon as we leave, he'll hightail it to Luker, an' that'll mean trouble."

"Let it," declared pugnacious Mike Malone. "Let him go git Tarker an' Luker an' all of 'em, then we'll blast daylights outta 'em. I ain't had a good scrap in years."

KIRBY shook his head. "We've got to get that borrowed herd to market, Mike. We want to do that as quick as we can, and without any trouble if possible. If we have to stop for a gunfight, the herd will stampede, get crippled and scattered. I ain't dodging them, you savvy; I'm just tryin' to avoid trouble until after we've sold th' herd."

"You're right," agreed Pop. "That herd's gotta be drove through an' sold, else Luker'll get th' Box K for sure. But what about Pearson? We gonna turn 'im loose?"

Buck grinned. "He'll stay here until we get back."

Fat Fred Pearson blustered. "I—I'll arrest every one of you if you try anything."

"We won't touch you unless you make us," Kirby told him firmly. "But, sheriff or no sheriff, we're not letting Luker take over th' Box K. Luker sent you out here to keep us from selling Box K beef. We're not selling *Box K* beef, but we are going to sell that borrowed herd out in th' corral. The boys are ridin' their own broncs, usin' their own saddles, wearin' their own clothes. You ain't got a leg to stand on trying to stop us; so don't try it, feller."

"That goes for us, too!" said hard-faced Pop Conroy, and the other Box K boys nodded grim agreement.

Julie came from the kitchen, finished with the dishes. Buck smashed out his cigarette. He singled out Shorty and Jeff. "Is there a room with just one window?"

"A small back bedroom," said Shorty.

"Get some boards, some nails and a hammer. Board up th' window. We'll put the sheriff inside as our guest, an' nail up the door. We'll leave him until..."

"Wh...what if the house catches on fire?" broke in Pearson, nervously.

"You kin gnaw yourself out," retorted little Mike Malone coldly, "like th' other rats do."

Pearson flushed, wet his lips; but he made no further protest. The grim-faced Box K boys invited no arguments.

Jeff and Shorty boarded up the window, came in with nails and hammer. Pop Conroy picked up the lamp, led the way to the room. He motioned for Pearson to go into it, then sat the lamp on the table. He went out, and Shorty held the thick boards in place while Jeff quickly nailed them on.

"You boys start th' herd," said Buck. "I'll wait with Miss Julie until Russ comes. He's..."

"He's here," called a voice from the front. "Say, what's going on?" Buck's

brief explanation brought an admiring whistle from Russ. "Well, Buck, you'd better get that herd moving pronto. I saw Tarker come into town while ago an' hunt up Luker. They both hit leather towards Tarker's ranch in a hurry. Does Tarker know what you're fixing to do?"

Kirby nodded gravely. "He saw Mike bringing his borrowed drag here. Well, fellers, let's get goin', but keep your gun-hands loose."

NIGHT clamped down tight and dark over the valley as they brought the herd from the corral. Shorty took point, Jeff and Candy flanked the west side, Pete and Mike the east side, and Pop took the drag. Shorty set a steady pace.

Buck lingered to say goodbye to Russ and Julie. They wanted to stay at the ranch to see that Pearson didn't escape and add to the trouble they felt was already brewing.

"Nope," said Buck firmly. "I don't want you two getting mixed up in this. After we get past Tarker's place, I'll come back an' let Pearson out. You both go back to town and stick to your restaurant. You'll hear from me sometime tomorrow."

He said goodbye then, and joined Pop at drag.

"They's two ways to go," Pop told him. "Th' short way is by Apache Pass, which is a windin' sort of gully through th' mountains, chuck full of rocks. Th' other way is farther east from Tarker's, an' smoother, but will take us two or three hours more. Which you think we oughta take?"

"The shortest an' quickest. The herd will be tired by the time we reach Apache, an' will go through it fairly slow. That way they won't get cut or bruised on th' rocks very much, an' will let them catch their wind to hit a faster clip on the other side."

"I'll tell Shorty to point for Apache," said Pop and rode off.

They bore on into the darkness. Shorty's pace kept the cattle moving nicely. One, almost two hours passed. A half-dozen miles lay behind them. Pop called over to Buck. "Apache is just about a mile away. Looks like we ain't gonna be jumped after all."

But from ahead there was a shout. "Buck, come a-running!" There was urgency in Shorty's voice.

"I talked too quick!" swore Pop.

"Slow the herd," Buck called as he spurred past Candy and Jeff.

Out of the blackness two horsemen took shape as Kirby rode toward point. Kirby's mouth tightened, and his right hand dropped warily to his side. "They're stoppin' us," said Shorty, "they say."

Kirby peered at the two riders. Both were broad, big men. One was a stranger. The other was Lafe Luker.

"This was a pretty smart trick, Kirby, but it ain't woking." It was Luker, insolently sneering. "Turn around an' go back."

Kirby kneed his horse farther from Shorty. "When I say th' word, Shorty, jerk your gun an' give them hell."

"Count us in," came Mike Malone's cold voice from the dark behind Luker and Tarker. "Me an' Pop are both here; we'll take care of Tarker. You fellers get Luker. All right, Buck, say when."

The two big men went rigid, eyes stabbing the darkness. The sounds of the cattle had cloaked the approach of Pop and Mike. Big Monk Tarker stuttered. "Wa...wait!"

"I'll count five," said Kirby flatly. "If you two are still here then...one, two, three, fo..."

With a rush, the pair reined, faded into the dark. Luker's snarling voice floated back. "Dam' you, Kirby..."

They waited a moment, expecting attack. But neither Luker nor Tarker was willing to fire first and disclose their position. Kirby rode after them a few paces, listened. "They've either gone or stopped," he told the others. "Well, I reckon hell is fixing to bust, an' we're gonna be right in the middle. Start the herd moving, but keep your eyes and ears open, and your hands on your guns. Shorty, you go back to tail with Pop. I'll take point from here."

"Aw, hell, Buck, let Pop stay back there alone. He's too old..."

"Too old, hell!" exploded Pop wrathfully. "I was scrappin' rustlers while you was still wearin' three-cornered pants!"

Another time and there would have been a lusty argument. But Kirby prevented that with quick interruption. "Quiet, fellers. They may be layin' out there for us. Don't make more noise than necessary. All right, Shorty, you keep point. Move into Apache Pass as quick as you can. Mike, you better come over to th' west side flank. I've got a hunch Tarker's gone after his boys he left somewhere out there in th' dark. Let's go, fellers. Bunch 'em close as possible, and move 'em as fast as you can."

5

A THIN, crescent-shaped moon peeked up in the eastern sky, cast uneven shadows over the floor of the valley as Shorty again took point toward the pass. By its meager light Kirby strained his eyes for movements that would be Luker and Tarker and Tarker's men. But there was no movement nor sound except the moving herd, now less than a half-mile from the mouth of Apache Pass.

Buck Kirby frowned, told Pop Conroy. "Don't like it, Pop. Almost too easy. Like takin' candy from a baby. We..."

And then it came. From the deep shadows at the mouth of Apache Pass. Shots and loud ribald yells. Then a dozen horses pouring from the pass, each rider firing, yelling, charging straight into the face of the herd. Instantly the cattle slowed in alarm. "They've been waiting to stampede th' herd," Kirby shouted, jerking his gun. "Let 'em have it before th' cattle spooks."

Shorty pulled his gun, fired. Before he could fire a second time, a bullet hit his horse. With a wild snort the animal went into a frenzy of bucking. Shorty had to fight to keep the saddle. The horse plunged into the herd, twisting, kicking, gone berserk from the bullet burn across its flank.

That was too much for the jittery cattle. Bawling, lunging, the leaders turned to flee. With a rumbling roar, the frightened herd turned tail and stampeded.

From behind were more shouts, more shots. Then the pounding of frenzied hooves drowned all else as the herd raced south. Plunging headlong back into the valley where they would become scattered, impossible to round up in time to complete the drive north.

"Pop!" Swift as his thoughts, Kirby wheeled, raced along beside the charging mass. "Cut down th' leaders!"

Tails high, nostrils flared, the front ranks of the fear-crazed cattle sped past. Not waiting to see if Pop understood, Kirby leaned low in the saddle. With straining muscles, his horse took up the chase. Slowly, a foot at a time, Kirby crept up even with the leaders. The ground was uneven, rocky, gave uncertain footing to the horse. But on, lungs laboring, the stout-hearted roan carried Kirby to the front of the wildly racing herd.

Deliberately, Kirby aimed at the leaders and fired, three times. Three big steers went down. Others piled over their bodies. There was a wild jumble of bawling, snorting cattle, a sickening snap here and there as bones gave, an eerie animal cry from a steer mortally wounded in the pile-up. But the panic lessened for a moment.

In that moment, Kirby's gun spoke until it was empty. Three more husky leaders went down, dying as scores of sharp hooves tore into their sleek hides. That broke the stampede, snarled the herd in a plunging, frenzied, kicking mass. By the time the steers had untangled themselves, Pop Conroy joined Kirby, and it was simple to start the cattle milling. Some

of them lay there, unable to arise. Several were dead, others would have to be killed. But most of the herd was saved.

Buck Kirby slowed his heaving mount, wiped sweat from his brow. As he did, there were shouts from back up the valley. Quickly Kirby filled the empty chambers of his Colt.

"Keep 'em circling," he told Pop, and rode back toward the pass. There were no more shouts, only silence. Kirby called: "Mike! Shorty! You fellers all right?"

They came to him then, two from either direction. Shorty's left arm dangled. There was a bullet-slash across Mike's cheek. "Yeah, we're all right. We heard you yell for Pop," said Mike, "so we stayed back to keep them hombres from botherin' you. Got one or two of 'em I think. You save th' herd?"

"Enough of it, I reckon." Kirby led them back to the cattle. Pete and Jeff had a couple of bullet burns on their arms. Shorty's wound was the most severe of all, but it was a clean hole in healthy upper arm muscle that would heal in time. Candy had escaped unscathed.

KIRBY patched up the boys while Candy and Mike went to help Pop with the herd. From time to time there was a shot. After a bit, Pop came back to report.

"Twenty-one dead in all. Th' six you shot, an' five which was killed in th' pile-up. I had to shoot ten more which was crippled or cut up pretty bad. A few others are gouged up from th' pile-up, but I reckon they'll be able to make it on in." Pop's voice tightened a bit. "Two of them hombres who jumped us are deader'n hell, too; neither one is Tarker or Luker. If any of th' rest was wounded, th' others toted 'em away."

"I reckon," observed Shorty without being cocky about it, "it's a good thing I got thirty head."

"You're plumb right," agreed Pop. "Well, what now, Buck? Ride on?"

Buck Kirby nodded. In ten minutes the herd was again headed for the pass. In another hour they were through it. The first tinge of dawn touched the eastern sky as Buck called a halt at the north exit of the pass.

"I'm turning back here. Got to go back an' turn Pearson loose. Mike, you better ride ahead an' get that buyer on the job. Pop and the boys will get the herd there this afternoon. After you're paid, better get back as quick as you can; if they try anything else, we might have another scrap on our hands."

"Where'll we find you—at th' ranch?" asked Pop.

"I don't know. Got any idea when you'll get back?"

Pop Conroy pursed his lips. "Well...we oughta get back past Apache about ten o'clock tonight."

"I don't know where I'll be, so I'll meet you," said Buck. "As soon as you get through the Pass, light three dry fires on th' south slope. I'll see 'em and..."

"Why three fires?" wondered little Mike Malone.

"I might mistake some grub-line rider's fire for yours if you made only one. But no drifter would build three," Buck told them. "When I see three, I'll know it's you fellers, an' I'll meet you at the east slope hay barn. Tomorrow we'll find Luker an' pay off that note."

"Good," agreed Pop Conroy. "All right, you hairpins; tighten your belts an' git them dogies movin'. We don't eat ontil to git to town. So th' quicker we git there, th' quicker we eat!"

Kirby waved them goodbye and reined south, as they started the herd on north.

DAWN CREPT into the eastern horizon as Kirby rode across the valley and approached the ranch-house. He was still a mile or so away when he caught a movement that made him halt. It was a horse, perhaps two, hitched before the ranch-house. Pearson's horse had been left in the corral when they rode away

with the cattle last night. That meant some of Luker's outfit had returned to the Box K following the fight at the Pass, and had released Pearson.

Kirby turned his mount and rode for the hills to the west. He glanced back a time or two, to see if he was being followed. But apparently he had not been seen, and he reached the fringe of timber without sign of pursuit.

He reined and rode toward the north, keeping within the timber. After a mile or so, he reached his objective—the big metal hay barn on the west slope of the valley.

He scouted around until he found a tiny stream, watered his horse and drank himself. He removed saddle and bridle, and used his lariat to stake the horse out to graze. Then he sought a knoll that was in the shade, from which he commanded a broad view of the valley. He built a cigarette to serve as breakfast, and propped against a tree for the long wait ahead.

As he remembered the wonderful supper Julie had served last night, his stomach staged a mild rebellion. But he decided against going into town for food. It was wisest to lay low until Pop got back with the money. Then they could find Luker and pay off the note.

He finished his cigarette and pinched out the butt, and was suddenly aware that he was sleepy after all-night with the cattle. He spread the saddle blanket and placed the saddle for a pillow. As he dozed off, the sun inched above the rim tops in the east, and daylight flooded the valley.

•

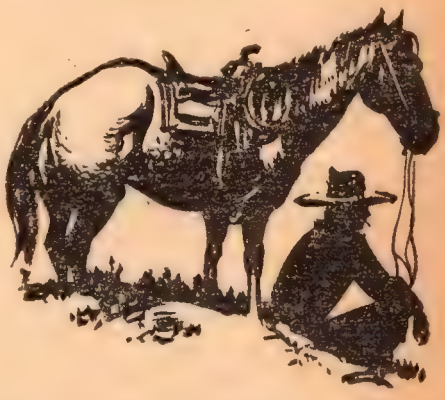
It was about noon when he awoke. He stretched and yawned, and reached for the makings. With a startled oath he grew rigid, and his hand went to his gun. A rider was approaching the barn, less than a hundred yards away.

There was something familiar about the slouched figure on the slow-moving horse. Buck suddenly recognized the rider to be Zanto, the knife thrower.

Grinning, Buck took his hand from his gun, stood up and waved. Zanto altered his course toward Buck, but the scrawny mount did not increase its gait. "Buenas dias, Senor Buck," called Zanto. He rode around the knoll to leave his horse in the glade where Buck's mount grazed. He dismounted, and from the folds of a ragged poncho tied behind his well-aged saddle, brought out a neatly wrapped package.

"You veree hard to find, Senor Buck. Zanto hav' look everywhere for you. Senorita Julie send you thees. You mucho hongry, si?" Zanto gave Buck the package.

Inside were a sandwich and a piece of pie. Buck disposed of them in short order, and went to the stream for a drink. Zanto patiently waited until Buck had finished and began rolling a cigarette. Now he spoke again. "Senorita Julie say tell you Senor Russ is vamoos." Zanto squatted in the shade and told Buck the details.



IT WAS Zanto's custom to provide cook-wood for the big stove in the restaurant Russ and Julie operated in exchange for his meals. He went by each morning after Russ had opened to fill the wood box. Russ usually opened early, and Julie came down later. But this morning, when Zanto

arrived, the restaurant was open, but no one was there.

Zanto had waited a short while, and when Russ did not show up, he went to tell Julie. She quickly dressed and came to take charge. Zanto filled the wood box, and Julie fixed his breakfast. While Zanto was eating, the fat sheriff came in for coffee, over which he lingered considerably.

Zanto finished eating and went to bring a case of canned tomatoes from the padlocked shed back of the restaurant where Russ kept surplus supplies. There was a man loitering out there, watching the restaurant's back door. Zanto told Julie when he returned with the tomatoes, and she immediately told him to ride and find Buck.

"She say fat peeg sheriff heard you tell them last night you see them today. She say they maybeso got Senor Russ, but you stay hid out—don't come to town, for malo hombres ees laying for you."

Buck nodded thoughtfully. "But what th' hell would they want with Russ?"

"Maybeso—how you say eet—runsom, si?"

"Ransom?" Buck considered that, and shook his head. "I don't think so. If it was, they wouldn't be laying for me. They'd just tell Julie what the price was on Russ, an' sit back an' wait for us to pay off. I reckon I'd better ride over to Box K an' have a look. They may be holding Russ there."

Quickly Zanto shook his head. "Zanto come by there, looking for Senor Buck. Ride far around, sneak up back way through barn and corral. Zanto move like shadow. No one see, but Zanto see all. Two malo hombres ees there, but no sign of Senor Russ."

Buck finished his cigarette and mashed out the butt. "You go back to town an' stay with Miss Julie. Tell her I'll be in after her as soon as it gets dark. We'll join Pop an' the boys, an' go find Russ, if he ain't showed up by then."

"Si. Zanto tell," said the other arising and going to his horse. In a few moments he was mounted, and riding for town.

6

AS DUSK settled over the valley, Buck saddled and mounted, then rode toward town. It was dark by the time he arrived.

He skirted around to approach the restaurant from the rear, and ground-reined his horse a short distance from the back door. Cautiously he crept toward the building, taking advantage of cover afforded by an occasional scrawny mesquite and a few patches of weeds. He scanned the dark for a moving shadow or a glowing cigarette that would bespeak a lurker. Satisfied that no one watched from the shadows, Buck slipped to the back door.

Julie was busy at the stove.

The screen was hooked inside. Buck softly tapped, and exposed himself so the light would shine on his face. With a surprised little gasp Julie recognized him, and hurried to unhook the screen.

She laid a warning finger across her lips. "Be careful! One of Tarker's men is up front. They've kept someone here watching all day. I've been half scared to death Zanto wouldn't find you, and..."

"Didn't he tell you I'd be in after dark?"

Julie shook her head. "I haven't seen him since he left to find you."

"Dam'!" exclaimed Buck. "They've got him, too!"

"Shhh!" cautioned Julie. "Wait, I'll be back."

She busied herself at the stove, filled a plate with food which she brought to a small table, and motioned for Buck to sit down and eat. She poured him a cup of coffee, then filled another plate and hurried with it through the swinging door that partitioned the kitchen from the front.

With ravenous delight Buck began eating. He heard Julie ask if her customer wanted coffee, and his affirmative reply. She came and filled a cup from the huge pot on the stove.

Buck heard the man ask a question as Julie took him his coffee, and her quick reply. Then Julie hurried back toward the kitchen. There was an oath, and heavy bootheels pounded after her.

Almost together they burst through the swinging door, even before Julie could cry a warning. Instantly Tarker's gunman saw Buck, and his gun hand speared down. Buck was caught awkwardly pinned down as he sat at the table.

But the gunman never fired. With ferocity of frantic terror, Julie Baker's hand was a blur of motion, darting out, up, down. There was a dull thud as iron skillet met skull. The gunman slumped down, gun slipping from his fingers. "Thanks," said Kirby as he arose, "I reckon you saved my life."

Suddenly Julie had to sit down. The quickness of her action had left her spent and breathless.

Kirby picked up the fallen gun and looked at its inert owner. "Just stunned. We'd better get out of here. Go lock th' front door, but leave th' lamps burning. They'll think you're still working an' maybe we'll have time to get aways a piece before they discover that both you an this feller's missing. We'll sneak out th' back door, an' lock this hombre in your shed."

Kirby lifted the man under the armpits and dragged him to the back door. Julie regained strength to point out the shed key hanging on the wall, then went to lock the front door.

They fixed the big stove so the fire would die down, and slipped out the back door. In a few minutes they reached Buck's horse.

"Ain't got time to get your bronc," Buck told her. "We'll have to ride double. You take the saddle an' I'll hang on behind. We'll join Pop an' the boys, then go find Russ an' Zanto."

They mounted and rode away. Julie, suddenly, felt strangely calm and peaceful as Buck's arms loosely encircled her, to both steady her and hold the reins. With a little sigh she relaxed, and her body swayed back to rest lightly against Buck's sinewy chest. For an instant he was startled, and drew away. Then slowly, he returned, and his hand closed over her two on the saddle horn with a touch that was gently firm. Words were unnecessary. So, silently, they rode out of town.

AFTER A SHORT ride, they came to the road that went from town to the Box K. Kirby reined along it, planning to follow it into the valley, then turn north and ride for the east slope barn, where they would wait for Pop and the boys.

But from behind they heard an approaching horse, being ridden at a lazy lope. Buck reined from the road, and spurred his horse, to get quickly into the dark so they would not be seen.

They heard the rider as he talked aloud, trying to extract greater speed from his mount. "It's Zanto!" cried Julie, recognizing the voice.

"Probably looking for us," said Buck, and reined back to the road.

In a few moments Zanto rode up, and recognizing them, pulled his ancient mount to a halt. "Look!" exclaimed Julie, leaning forward to peer more closely. "He's been hurt."

Buck Kirby struck a match, and its fleeting glimmer left them stunned.

Zanto's face was puffed and beaten, one eye swollen shut. The lips were thick, bruised. Traces of blood were about his face, neck and scalp, and on his clothing. His left arm dangled oddly, as if it had been severely wrenched.

"Who did it, feller?" grimly asked Buck as the match flared out.

"The fat peeg—Pearson." Then, falteringly, Zanto told them.

As he was riding back to Julie, after seeing Buck, one of Tarker's men encountered him at the edge of town. When questioned as to where he had been, Zanto said out cutting wood for the restaurant. But since Zanto didn't have his axe as he usually did when he went to cut wood, the man became suspicious. He forced Zanto to ride in a round-about way to the back of the jail so no one would see him being taken there.

Pearson accused him of meeting Buck, of knowing where Kirby was, and what his plans were. When Zanto steadfastly denied it, Pearson and the gunman used force to try and make him talk. They had taken away his knives so that he couldn't fight back. And since the object of his ire was helpless and defenseless, Pearson let his anger take full vent with fists, blackjack, and finally a merciless, tendon-tearing twist to Zanto's left arm.

But Zanto withstood it, stolidly. As dark came on, they had finally given up. Keeping Zanto's deadly knives, they had kicked him out the back door.

"But Zanto hav' other knives," said Zanto, and Julie Baker shivered at the hate in his voice. "Zanto's right arm still good. Zanto start after theem. They go to Box K; they hav' Senor Russ there!"

"The hell they do!" ejaculated Kirby, and Julie gave a little gasp, envisioning similar treatment to Russ that Zanto had received.

"Si. Zanto dumb burro when there before. They hav' Senor Russ in room where you put fat peeg sheriff. They try make Senor Russ talk like they try Zanto. We hurry, si?"

"Si," said Buck Kirby grimly. "Zanto, get your horse moving as fast as he will. Hold on, Julie. We're not goin' to wait for Pop an' the boys. If them coyotes have beat up Russ..." He finished with a touch of spurs that sent his mount into a lope. With pounding heels and coaxing voice, Zanto surprisingly got his horse moving in comparable speed.

After a mile or so, Kirby reined up abruptly. A group of riders was coming toward them. Buck turned from the road, and led the way south at a quick trot, so that darkness cloaked their presence. In a few moments the group pounded past, riding at a hard lope toward town.

"Wonder what that means?" mused Kirby. "Well, I reckon maybe we'll soon find out. Th' ranch is just over that ridge. Come on, Zanto."

7

BUCK LED the way in a wide circle, and they dismounted behind the bunkhouse. Three saddled horses were hitched before the house where light glimmered through one shade-covered window. Kirby searched the darkness for movement or sound, but found none.

"I'm going up to peek through that window, maybe figure a way to get Russ. Then we'll go wait for Pop an' the boys. They're to light three signal fires soon as they get through Apache Pass, an' meet me at the east slope hay barn. Julie, stay here in the shadows an' keep your ears peeled for Luker an' his bunch. Can you whistle?"

Julie nodded.

"Good. Make like a night mocker if you sight anything that looks like trouble."

Zanto shuffled his feet, and said: "Zanto go see no malo hombres hav' hide in barn." He silently faded away.

Keeping within the shadows, Kirby crept to the house. Flattened against the wall, he inched along the side of the building to the lighted window.

A pencil-thin shaft of light came from beneath the shade. Stooping, Buck peered through the narrow opening. Three men were seated in a rough semi-circle, Russ Baker bound to a chair in the center. Plainly he bore signs of mistreatment. His face was bruised, one eye almost shut, and his clothing was mussed and awry.

Swiftly fixing the positions of the two guards in his mind, Kirby slipped to the corner of the front porch. He was halted by a low, bird-like whistle. Again it came, nearer than before. It was Julie, coming to join him.

Pointing to the north, she whispered: "Look...the signal fires!"

Kirby looked and was elated as he saw the three dots of fire at the foot of Apache Pass. Then urgency crept in his whispered reply: "We need them here. Can you go bring them in?"

"I can. But I've an idea that might get them here quicker." She indicated the haystacks near the barn. "It's a shame to destroy fine hay, but if we set three stacks on fire, just like their signal out there, Pop will savvy we need him here, and come on the run pronto. Right?"

Buck Kirby chuckled and took her by the arm. Guiding her toward the haystacks, he fished in his pocket for matches. "Someday I'm goin' to buy you the shiniest medal I can find. Maybe two. For you've sure earned 'em tonight, by usin' that skillet, an' having this idea!"

Swiftly carrying out the plan, Buck and Julie drew into the shadows of a nearby shed. The flames caught, leaped high into the night. At the resultant glow, one of the guards rushed from the house to investigate the blaze.

"Two birds with one stone!" exclaimed Kirby, and sprinted for the house. Gun drawn, he sped to the front door, tiptoed across the floor. The other guard was at a window, gazing out at the fire. Kirby stepped across the threshold and spoke softly.

"Reach for the ceiling, an' keep facing the wall."

THE MAN started, then his hand plunged down. Instantly Kirby fired, and the bullet dug into the floor at the man's feet. His hands shot aloft. Kirby unarmed him, then severed the ropes that bound Russ Baker.

"They accused me of knowing when Pop was to meet you, and meant to lay in ambush an' take the money," said Russ, rubbing circulation back into his wrists. "They worked me over to make me talk, even though I didn't actually know a thing. So I finally gave them a yarn about you meeting Pop at my place at ten tonight. They just left to go lay for you there."

"I know," said Buck. "We passed 'em..." His remarks were cut short by a whistled bird call from the darkness—shrill and urgent.

Kirby gave the guard's gun to Baker, whirled and sped from the house. But there was no trouble. Instead a figure sprawled ridiculously on the ground in a flurry of arms and legs. Over him stood Julie, brandishing the fallen man's gun. Her explanation was crisp. "I hid in the shadows and tripped him."

Buck Kirby grinned as he hauled the man to his feet, and told him to go inside. Using belts and neckerchiefs of the hapless pair, Kirby bound both guards in chairs. Then he turned to Julie. "For this," he laughed, "you get three medals. Each big as a saucer."

Color rose to her cheeks at the tone of his voice, and the look in his steady

gaze. Their thoughts were disrupted by the sound of approaching horses. But they were coming from the south, the direction of town...not from Apache Pass.

From the doorway, the riders were easily discernible by the light of the burning haystacks. As Kirby watched, the group split. Two men rode toward the burning stacks, the others coming on toward the house. Leading this group were Lafe Luker and Monk Tarker, and beside Tarker was the man Julie had hit with the skillet. They had found him and released him from the shed.

Kirby shut the door and blew out the light. "It's Luker an' his pack of lobos. We're cornered like rabbits in a coop. Russ, help me blockade this door. Julie, get the cartridges off them two hombres, an' pile them on the table. We're gonna need every one pronto, for hell's gonna pop, an' we've got front-row seats!"

There was a surprised oath or two from outside as the house went dark. Then Luker's suspicious voice called: "What th' hell you doin' in there?"

One of the bound men yelled: "It's Kirby an' th' Bakers; they've got us tied up."

There was an instant of startled quiet. Then Luker snapped an order. Riders dismounted. One took the horses back out of the way. The others spread apart to surround the house.

Gathering up a handful of cartridges, Kirby told the man who had yelled: "When this is over, I'm gonna hang a knot on th' side of your head."

The omnious silence outside was broken by a single shot. A signal; the house was surrounded. Then came Luker's voice. "I've still got you licked, Kirby; you're cornered. You give up an' talk terms my way, an' we'll let th' Bakers go. If you don't, we'll rip you all apart!"

Beside one of the windows, Kirby slowly lowered his gun, as the import of Luker's statement struck him. This was his fight; after all he had no business dragging Russ and Julie into it. They might get hurt, even killed. And Buck Kirby would never of his own accord cause either of them, especially Julie, to be hurt in any way.

A SMALL hand gripped his arm, and a throaty voice softly whispered. "I know what you're thinking, but don't. Luker isn't the kind to play square. He's desperate now; he knows he's on the verge of losing. He'd kill all of us to get the Box K. He's the type you just have to whip. I...I want to help you do it, Buck."

Buck caught her and held her, and his voice was gentle. "My dad an' mother got married twenty-four hours after they met. We can't beat their record for time, Julie, but I know we can match their happiness!" Then Kirby knocked out a window pane with his gun and called: "Luker! Here's your answer."

He fired in the direction from which Luker's voice had come. Cursing, Luker yelled his reply. "Give 'em hell!"

From the shadows came a wave of gunfire. Bullets stung into the walls, crashed through the windows. Broken glass splattered the floor. In the kitchen was a clatter as lead knocked pots and pans from wall hooks.

Kirby darted from room to room, window to window, firing, reloading, firing. Russ Baker kept in the front room, firing through the front windows, guarding attack from the barricaded door. Buck found Julie back in the kitchen. One of the tied men's guns grew hot in her small hands as she steadily fired at the gun flashes outside.

"Hey!" Buck pulled her from a window that had been riddled by bullets. "Wanta get killed? You get down an' stay there."

"I can hold them off back here. Look!" She twisted from his grasp, fired two quick shots through the win-

dow. A man stumbled from the shadows, clawed at his face, and fell.

"Maybe you're right," admitted Buck, startled by her cool, quick accuracy. "But be careful."

Back in the front, Russ was puzzled as Buck came into the room laughing. "What's so funny?"

"Julie. I told her to duck down, an' she answered by shooting off a hombre's jaw."

"She's some gal," chuckled Russ.

"You can say that again!" was Buck's fervent response, which somehow pleased Russ as he heard.

They became aware that it was suddenly quiet outside.

"They're coming!" grimly said Buck, filling the empty chambers in his gun. Russ Baker grunted agreement.

The shadows leaped to menacing life, became a wave of crouched, darting figures. Men raced for the house, holding fire until they were in close. It was the showdown!

Russ shouted a warning to Julie.

KIRBY leveled his gun, and loosened a crescendo of death. A man screamed as hot lead found a vital spot. Another was down, yelling in pain from a broken leg. Still big Lafe Luker led the others on, shooting now as they ducked in close to the walls.

Kirby was forced back from a bullet-ripped window. Baker was driven back from his post. Julie cried out as hot lead nicked her flesh, then hurried from the kitchen, asking for more cartridges.

Buck picked up the last handful from the table, divided them three ways. "Make each one count. They'll bust through the door in a few minutes. Our only chance is to cut them down as they do. Julie, you get back in a corner."

Julie Baker filled her gun. "I'm sticking beside you two; if we go down, we'll all go down together."

For a fleet instant Buck caught her and held her. Then he moved to one side, placed Julie behind him.

They were at the door, with a battering ram.

Kirby lifted his gun and fired through the panel. A yelp told his lead found flesh. But Luker's gun crew kept pounding away. The furniture was slipping, falling back from the door. Bent low to avoid gunfire, men pushed and strained and pounded. The lock was giving, the door inching inward. Then they rammed it from the hinges.

Lafe Luker led his men as they leaped through the opening, and swarmed into the room.

"Burn powder, amigoes!" cried Buck Kirby, and flung his hot gun into action. Two, three times it roared. Two men crumpled, but others took their places, rocked the house with their gunfire. Hot lead nicked Kirby in a half-dozen places, each a painful slash like a white-hot knife blade. One arm went limp as lead speared flesh. Russ Baker was suddenly down, a leg torn and bleeding. Behind them, Julie was firing as fast as she could.

Big Lafe Luker stood suddenly before them. An instant he was poised, eyes murderously focusing to the flame-distorted room. Then his big gun roared. Russ Baker slumped and lay still, and Julie gave a short little outcry and dropped. That cry thrust into Kirby like a red-hot knife. "Dam' you, Luker..."

Luker advanced a step and fired. Lead ripped into Kirby's shoulder and another slug slithered across his scalp, caused a thousand dancing lights to blur his vision. Kirby struggled to keep from falling, fought his gun until it leveled, then fired until it was empty. Dazedly, he saw big Lafe Luker wither and fall. With startling contrast, stillness was suddenly in the house.

Then more figures were filtering in. Kirby tried to clear his vision, tried

to find more cartridges. A gentle hand took his empty gun.

"It's me...Pop. You all right, Buck?"

THE BOX K riders lighted lamps, and stared at the shambles. One of the boys was dispatched for a doctor, then Mike and the others bent to work. Dead and wounded were toted outside, the latter bandaged awaiting later delivery to jail. Candy brought a bucket of water, and Pop Conroy bent over Russ. Through pain-filled haze, Buck made his way to Julie. Russ was stunned from a bullet crease along his head. When she saw Russ fall, Julie thought he was killed, and the shock had caused her to faint. Pop bathed their faces, and in a few moments both were revived.

Little Mike Malone returned from outside, frowning. "I found Tarker an' Pearson out near th' burned stacks, their heads danged near cut off. There's only..."

Shuffling footsteps were at the door, then Zanto humbly entered. "Zanto's knives always sharp. Zanto hope eet is muy bueno?"

"Very good? Yeah, Zanto, I reckon it is," replied Pop Conroy as he tore bandages for Buck's shoulder. Candy and the others had fixed Russ' leg.

But Zanto was dissatisfied with approval from others. He regarded Buck anxiously. "Eet is all right with you, Senor Buck?"

Buck Kirby didn't immediately answer. Sitting on the floor beside Julie, he was looking at her, a question in his eyes. With a smile, she reached and took his hand. Then Buck said quietly to Zanto: "Yeah, amigo. Everything's all right."

★

THE PARTHIAN SOT

by James A. Hines

THERE WAS a certain very brilliant young lawyer in northern New Mexico who was noted for his ability to put away large quantities of the fluid that ossifies.

One day, he came sailing into the court room with three sheets to the wind.

"Mornin' yer honor. Hozza boy?" he bellowed.

A great silence descended on the court room. Then—

"Git out of here," thundered the judge. "You're drunk, sir!"

The attorney grinned complacently, picked up his briefcase, and replied in all good humor:

"Thass right, yer honor, an' it's the firs' correct decision I've ever heard in thish court!"

Trouble at Top O'Dawn

Wade Buckner had thought of little but the gold he was stealing from a Union paymaster. Yet, now that he had it, something was happening that made it seem unimportant...

By Ben Smith

THE MOUTH of the cave loomed merely as a deeper patch of darkness under the beetling brow of the mountain. Hidden by the wild-apple and scrubby thorn, it would have taken keener eyes than Wade Buckner's to have found it. As it happened, Buckner stumbled into it after traveling nearly a quarter of a mile on his lean stomach through the dried, fallen nettles and rabbit-

droppings, dragging the gold-filled saddle-bags after him.

Expecting at any moment the view halloo of the Unionists on his trail, accompanied by the crash of a musket and the thud of a ball, he curled his long legs under him on the dry, sand-strewn cave floor and looked to the loading of his two guns.

Wade Buckner was a slim, dark-featured man, sun and wind-burned, of an age that might have been twenty, or forty. In spite of being the hottest thing, at that moment, in the northern part of the Oklahoma Territory, his black eyes crinkled at the corners with an easy good humor and his broad mouth twisted upward at the ends. His nose was rather prominent, along with his angular cheek-bones, speaking of some Indian blood in his background.

His flannel shirt—he wore no coat—had been torn by the briers, and his tooled boots were scuffed and worn by much recent walking. A Union Cavalryman, keener-eyed and a better shot than his fellows, had accounted for Buckner's horse more than four hours ago. With the body of his dead mount, his trail apparently ended.

Seemingly, Buckner and the saddle-bags of Union gold had taken to the air and flown. As far as the fugitive knew, the dragoons were still circling around that spot, attempting to cut his trail. Thankfully, they had no dogs.

But Buckner knew that the Union paymaster, of late custodian of these same saddle bags, would nurse a hell of a headache from riding into a taut rope and the Union forces south of Kansas would be on the lookout for him, Buckner, with something less than love in their hearts.

It would be prudent to keep under cover, at least for several days. The first thaws of 1863 had passed the tag-ends of the Ozark Mountains, and the weather was such that the fugitive would find no discomfort in sleeping in the open. The problem was food. Firing a gun was, of course, out of the question—as well as cooking any meat he might be able to get. The season was too early for ripe berries, and ground-squirrels had taken care of the past winter's nut crop.

His guns loaded, Buckner slid them into the holsters at his hips and looked about him.

THE VAULTED roof of the cave vanished into the murky dimness under the mountain, giving no clue as to the extent of the natural room. The sandy floor was clean—probably a spring freshet had washed it bare of animal-sign—and slightly warm to the touch, although sunlight never pierced the screen of undergrowth at the cave mouth.

Sighing, Wade kicked off his boots and propped his head upon the hard saddle-bags, resting.

Just before dusk, a body of Union soldiers rode by, their uniforms dust-caked, their ranks disorderly. They were either a party of searchers sent to comb the foothills for Buckner, or they were a returning scouting party.

From the shelter of his hiding place behind the wild-apple and thorn, Buckner watched. It was possible that the dragoons were merely a decoy; by parading openly northward, they might intend to convince a hiding man that they had given up the search.

It was more likely, Wade reflected, that a small force had been left behind to spring the trap. True, the Indian General, Stand Watie, was near. Only a few days before, his Mounted Cherokee Rifles had ambushed a supply-train intended for the Union spearhead deep in the Territory.

It might be that the Unionists were wary of spending a night in Watie's vicinity; in that event, it would be perfectly safe for Buckner to venture forth at the coming of darkness, heading southward.

The slim man squatted on his heels—he had pulled on his boots at the

first sound of a hoof on the soft dirt of the road—and pondered. Near him, lying in the sand, the dark leather of the saddle-bags mocked him. The brass insignia glittered in the half-light, as though reminding him of the double-eagles that the bags contained.

Of little use to me, Buckner reflected, *or to the Confederate cause, hidden here in this cave.*

The sounds of the Unionist's passing had long-since faded into nothingness and purple dusk had dropped into the valley below Top O'Dawn Mountain. As Buckner watched, his mouth watering, a small covey of quail worked their way into the undergrowth near the cave mouth, feeding on the insects and seeds in the damp earth.

Suddenly they changed their course, moving nervously toward the trail, scurrying through the grass. Something had disturbed their quiet feeding.

Wade Buckner felt the short hair at the nape of his neck bristle. Certain that it was not he that alarmed the birds; it was likely that something, or someone, moved along the limestone ledge over the cave mouth.

Listening, his ears marking the unnatural silence of the growing dusk, Buckner moved slowly back into the black maw of the cave, getting first to his knees, then to his feet, standing humped under the low rocky ceiling.

A tiny pebble, rolling from the ledge, struck the soft sand before him making no more sound than a dead leaf falling upon still water.

●

DARKNESS came, like a velvet pall, and Buckner could no longer see the trees before the cave. He held his breath and waited.

Another broken bit of limestone fell to the ground, rattling a little in the leaves, then a slender shape plummeted to the sand at the cave mouth, remaining erect against the lighter blackness of the sky.

Wade Buckner was out of the hole in the rock, his sinewy arms outstretched, his broad shoulders low. Catching the intruder around the chest, the two of them went rolling on the ground. Instinctively, Wade clasped one palm over his victim's mouth to prevent any outcry that might alarm a lurking Union soldier.

The flesh beneath his arm was unexpectedly soft and yielding, and wind-scented hair, long and silky, fell against his mouth. The full lips moved beneath his hand and sharp teeth snapped together in the flesh of his palm.

Smothering an involuntary cry of pain, Wade dropped his arms and stumbled back, while his erstwhile opponent whirled to face him. The deadly gleam of steel thrust out of the night toward him and the muzzle blossomed into a plume of orange fire that engulfed him. All the hammers of Thor struck Buckner at once and he went to his knees in the sand.

Dimly, to his fading senses, came the sound of a voice, a woman's voice, then the darkness of the cave claimed him and Wade fainted.

●

His first conscious thought was that he had been captured by the Unionists and that awakening would find him a prisoner. The yellow flames of a tiny campfire chiseled their way beneath his eyelids, and to his nostrils came the odor of cooking meat.

In the wan light, glittering crysta's formed miniature suns on the stone ceiling, and the sand was golden on the uneven floor.

Groaning, Wade Buckner closed his eyes and waited for the limestone walls to find their place and stay there, rather than continue their disconcerting waltz around his aching head.

"*'Cio,*" the voice was low, guttural. "*Taw-he-get?*"

Reeling, Buckner sat up. Soft, gentle hands caught his shoulders,

forcing him back on the sand. "Quiet," the voice continued. "Rest."

From afar, Wade heard again the sound of a woman's voice, the tones liquid as a flute, and the answering rumblings of a Cherokee. His curiosity, great as it was, was less than the pain of his bullet-creased head and Wade Buckner slept.

WHEN NEXT he woke, it was daylight. He had been moved, he discovered, farther back in the cave. The mouth, and the screening undergrowth, was not visible from his present position. Near him lay the cold ashes of a woodfire; overhead a cleft in the rock formed a natural chimney. Through this opening, warm sunlight poured.

From the cave-mouth, out of his range of vision, hoofbeats sounded, their rataplan growing fainter with the moments. A footstep slithered upon the dry floor and a Cherokee, his copper face taciturn, watched Buckner.

He grunted, and the syllables fell, one behind the other like sheep over a fence. "Make no movement," the Indian said; "I have been told to keep you here."

He squatted easily on his heels, his violently-colored plaid shirt falling around his lean legs. He turned the brassy plane of one angular cheek toward Buckner, but the man was not deceived. In those enigmatic black eyes, his slightest action would be noted. And, in the grip of those gigantic hands, he would be helpless. Buckner sat quietly, his hands held loosely before him.

His holsters were empty and the saddlebags, filled with Union gold, were nowhere to be seen.

This Cherokee, Buckner could understand; it was twenty to one that the silent Indian was one of Stand Watie's men. But, what of the woman? Wade was certain that he had not been deceived; the form he had grappled with in the darkness of the night before had been that of a girl. He had even heard her voice. Where was she?

It was impossible that a girl would be riding with the Mounted Rifles, fighting the battle of the Confederacy. Watie's men were tough, hard-riding, fighting men, trained to strike and melt into the forest. Strike again, dealing death and consternation to the Union forces. Certainly no woman could hope to have the necessary qualifications.

A soft footstep was his answer.

The Cherokee rose silently to his feet, his form towering over the seated Buckner as a slim figure stepped into the high-domed inner cavern.

TINY, SCARCELY over five feet tall, round of limb, dressed in clothing as rough as a night rider, stood the girl. She laughed and her white teeth were even, perfect. Her face was dusky, although not the coppery sheen of the Indian, and her brown hair hung in even waves to her shoulders. A black hat, broad-brimmed and dent-crowned, hung by a leather thong secured about her slim throat.

"*'Cio*," she said to Buckner, and the Cherokee language flowed easily from her tongue. "Last night I was afraid I had killed you."

Wade Buckner grinned sheepishly. "I wasn't expecting a lady," he replied, "when you..." he paused and his dark eyes twinkled, "...dropped in on me."

There was a certain wariness about her eyes, as crows' feet edge the lids of one who lives in danger.

Buckner stood erect, fighting the giddiness, feeling the stiffness of his lame muscles. The Cherokee, silent as a stone image, stood protectingly near the girl.

"You should be spanked," Buckner said, "and sent home to your mother."

She took a step nearer, something stirring in the depths of her eyes. Before he could anticipate the blow, she had slapped him stingingly across

the cheek with her open palm. "My mother," she said evenly, "and father, too, were killed at the Battle of Dripping Springs."

"I suppose I'm responsible?" The injustice of the act infuriated Buckner and the ignominy of being struck by a tiny woman did nothing to ease the pain.

"You and your Union friends."

Buckner grinned at her and his amusement seemed to further enrage her. She caught her full lip between her even teeth but, struggling with her temper, she remained silent. "I'm a bird of no color," Wade told her. "Neither Union nor Confederate."

"Liar!" There was something stirringly beautiful in her scorn. At another time and place, Buckner felt, she would be a woman worth knowing. "You carried with you Union gold and you say you're not one of them? You bore saddlebags marked with their insignia and you claim no kin to them?"

She continued speaking in Cherokee, Buckner felt, for the benefit of her Indian companion. Suddenly he switched to English.

"A Union paymaster," he explained, "now nurses an aching head because of my trap. His brothers-in-arms chased me into this cave yesterday, after killing my horse. If you think they love me, let them catch sight of me. I'd hang on the nearest tree."

For an instant, belief softened her eyes, but only for the briefest heartbeat. "Come," she said, motioning to her companion. "It's safe to go. Stand Watie will decide this."

IN A CLUMP of trees, scarcely a hundred yards from the cave, three horses were tethered. This, then, Buckner reasoned, was the cause of the girl's morning ride. She had returned to camp to fetch a mount for him.

Indicating that he was to use a big-limbed, deep chested roan gelding, the girl swung in the saddle and led the way at a rapid canter through a clearing that ran up the valley. To the west, another low range of mountains reared their tree-topped heads. Southward, the hills rolled out onto a flat plain that ran into the Sallisaw Indian hunting ground. Oak grew in the valley, hickory and straight pine. Fringes of sumac fanned along the limestone outcroppings.

And, to their right, westward, old Top O'Dawn looked benignly down. Although less than a thousand feet in height, the mountain was so called because the sun, minutes before broad daylight, splashed the rocky crest with gold.

The girl rode silently, forward in the saddle as though to urge her sleek-limbed gelding to greater effort. No docile, ambling mare for her, Buckner noted with unexplained satisfaction, she preferred the spirit of the emasculated stallion.

The Cherokee rode almost sullenly. But Buckner knew that it was only tribal custom. The Cherokee, as well as his brothers, was voluble except in the presence of strangers. The Indians of the Territory in 1863 were, in spite of their tragic history in Georgia, friendly to the white man. Many of them were Christian.

Still, Buckner felt as he often felt—out of place and unwanted in the company of this ancient, alien race. Ancient, yes, he reflected, but hardly alien. It was those with white skins who were strangers to this land.

Musing, the day passed before they reached the end of the valley, and Wade had to bring his mind to the present forcibly. It was then he realized that he had scarcely taken his eyes from the girl who rode ahead of him.

There was something vibrantly bewitching in the trim lines of her body. Her movements were fluid and easy with the even gait of her horse and she rode as if she were part of the saddle.

Wade Buckner felt his admiration growing for the girl, although angrily remembering the sting of her palm

against his cheek. His thirty years weighed heavily on his broad shoulders when she finally raised a slim hand to signal a halt.

WADE SLID from the saddle, and fell into step beside her. "I could have made a break for it a long time ago," he said.

"Yes?" Her tone was even, inviting no response.

"Sure. A hundred times, when your Cherokee friend wasn't watching."

She looked up at him and elfin humor hid in the corner of her eyes. "Johnny Killdeer is always watching. And, he can shoot the eye out of a soaring hawk, or the heart out of a man at a hundred yards."

Although her tone was light, Wade felt she spoke the truth and felt a shiver of something lope the length of his spine. It was a good thing, perhaps, that his curiosity had bade him had left the next move up to her. ride along; that his love for adventure

Probably the gold I stretched a rope to get is gone, he thought grimly, *but hell, tomorrow is another day, and I'm still alive.*

The girl called softly in the gathering darkness and dusky figures sprang seemingly from the ground about them. Motley in dress, in plaid shirts hanging outside denim trousers, some in tribal regalia, a few in uniform, Stand Watie's Mounted Rifles looked like a bunch of coppery faced scarecrows.

But Buckner knew that their appearances belied their ability; nowhere in the south did a more devoted group of fighting men exist, none more closely knit under a great leader. Nowhere was there as high a fever of freedom as existed in the scraggly Cherokee camp.

They had been fighting since the early days in Georgia under Stand Watie, sometimes among themselves for tribal rights, then later against the Union in this Civil War. But in all the battle, there was a devotion to purpose that might make a white man envious.

From the midst of the group gathered about the tiny, well-hidden fire, a squat figure strode. Broad of shoulder, powerful of arm, with black hair brushed severely back from over an intelligent forehead, liquid eyes at once tender and demanding. This, Buckner knew without being told, was the legendary Stand Watie.

"'Cio, ga-houc'." The tribal chieftain's soft voice lifted in greeting to the girl and the enigmatic eyes were alight with something akin to awe.

For the space of minutes the girl and the Indian talked, their monosyllables falling easily in the softness of the night. Then, she passed on toward the fire and left Wade to face Stand Watie.

"Your name?" The Indian's face was a blur in the darkness as full night settled over the valley. Somewhere, a tree-frog grumped, tuning the membrane of his throat for the concert to begin later. By the fire, the low voice of the girl was heard, mingled with the baritone of her companions.

Johnny Killdeer, back from escorting the horses to wherever they were hidden, stepped past Watie and Buckner, heading toward the fire.

WADE THOUGHT swiftly. It was unlikely that Watie, or any of his men, had heard of him. Still, since it suited his purpose to remain a lone wolf, it would be better if his identity remained a secret.

On the other hand, should these people find later that he had lied, he would lose whatever advantage he might gain with them. The Cherokee hated a liar.

"I'm Wade Buckner," he said.

Watching Watie's face, he noticed no change in the Indian's expressionless eyes. He sighed in mental relief, certain that his name meant nothing to Stand Watie.

Watie continued the questioning in Cherokee. Buckner was to learn later that the tribal chieftain spoke only the

most broken English. "You are a Union friend?"

"No."

"You bear their gold."

"I took it from them." In the type of guerilla warfare waged in the Territory, such acts were not considered thefts. The battle was carried, not only in division against division, but even man to man. Watie's Mounted Rifles looted Union wagon trains, raided their strings of riding stock, stole weapons. Even with the Confederacy behind him, Watie held a commission from Jefferson Davis, it was up to the hard-fighting Cherokees to find their own supplies.

A thin smile edged Buckner's lips as he remembered the Union paymaster, young and inexperienced, riding full tilt into the stretched rope across the trail. The green officer, all fight removed by his abrupt descent to the hard ground, had offered no resistance when Buckner had rode alongside and lifted the saddlebags.

The fact that the purloining of the Union pay was in no way a part of Buckner's duty, worried the tall man not in the least. Such engagements, while exposing him to risk, were the very spice of his life between the opposed armies. It was the sharp-edged sword of danger that kept Buckner in fighting fettle.

With the going of Watie, Johnny Killdeer came from the fire to stand near Buckner, his coppery face expressionless. It was plain that, while treated with courtesy, Wade Buckner would be kept under surveillance until his exact status had been determined.

OF THE girl, Buckner saw no more that night. She had vanished from her spot near the campfire and the sound of hooves had echoed from the rocky cliffs. Possibly she was away on some nocturnal errand of her own.

But what was she doing here in the camp of the Mounted Rifles? It was evident that she bore a deep enmity toward the Unionists since the death of her parents at Dripping Springs. And yet, this war was as civilized as warfare can ever be. It was unlikely that the old couple had been killed as a direct action of any Union soldier. It was more likely that they had met their death as an end effect of the Dripping Springs engagement, possibly in the burning of the town.

Puzzled, Wade propped his back against a rock that still held the heat of the sun. Near him, not intruding but with his presence ever felt, squatted Johnny Killdeer. "The girl who was with us," Buckner asked in Cherokee, "what is her name?"

Buckner heard the Indian move in the darkness and found that Johnny Killdeer had moved closer, the plaid of his gaudy shirt now plainly visible. Faint starlight, the moon had not yet risen, touched the cold butt of the heavy gun at his hip.

"She is Elizabeth Evans," the Indian's tongue had difficulty with the English name. "We call her Laughing Water."

Of the two, Buckner considered the Cherokee cognomen the more appropriate. There was something hidden in her, as the sunlight is trapped in a deep pool. Yet, at times, there was a ripple on the surface of her soul that could only be from honest amusement.

●

Buckner must have slept. He opened his eyes to the mist hung mountains as they smoldered under gray daylight. A fan of gold touched the peak on Top O'Dawn, and lacy spirals of fog hung over the valley. Near Buckner, as he stirred and stretched, Johnny Killdeer sat immobile, apparently in the same position of the night before. His black eyes were alert and he gave no sign of having slept.

But of the camp of the Cherokee Mounted Rifles, there was not the slightest evidence. The campfire was

gone, even the ashes had been carefully scattered, and the leaves about the clearing were wet with the dew.

Watie's men, as silent as death itself, had moved on under the cover of the night.

"Come," said Johnny Killdeer. "It is time."

LEADING the way into a broad cleft in the rock, he saddled two horses that had been tethered there. Buckner found, to his satisfaction, that the big roan he had ridden the day before had been left for his use.

They ate as they rode. Dried beef from the Indian's saddlebag and a sort of hard cornbread that grated on the throat like sand. Wade Buckner worked his jaws enthusiastically. No wonder the Cherokees had good teeth. One might as well chew on a horseshoe as the sun baked meat.

Killdeer led the way to a high pass beside Top O'Dawn, pausing to breathe his horse before dropping into the valley. Below them the green tops of the pines looked like a tightly woven carpet and the silver thread of a river wound itself into a tapestry of beauty.

"Look," said Killdeer, "near the end of the mountain."

In a little clearing near the river, a group of riders appeared. Although over a mile away, the gray of their uniforms was plainly visible. Sunlight danced on the cold steel of their arms.

An officer in the lead swung his sabre and the dragoons swung into a double column, guarding the first of the supply wagons to cross the shallow ford.

The mules slid into the clear water and the big wheels of the caissons sank into the mud of the river bank. Immediately, some of the cavalrymen were dismounted to put their shoulders against the wet, iron rims and get the vehicles moving. Haste was apparent in their every action and the men who had remained mounted watched the forest around them rather than the freeing of the wagons.

Wade Buckner started to speak, but Killdeer motioned him to silence, his black eyes never leaving the tableau being enacted below them.

Suddenly, from the rough rocks along the river, dark riders appeared. The rattle of musketry came faintly to the men on the mountain and the gray bursts of smoke were plainly visible. The Union soldiers wheeled their horses to find cover, while the drivers of the supply wagons peeled off the high seats to take refuge in the knee deep water.

Across the river a lone figure on horseback galloped to the edge of the water, his arm outflung in defiance. Even at the distance, Buckner recognized the sturdy figure of Stand Watie.

A hail of rifle fire began, and the smooth water of the river was churned by the rain of balls falling short of Watie's position.

"Why don't he get out of there?" Wade Buckner gasped, rising to get a better view. Johnny Killdeer said nothing but his coppery face was sober.

Watie's plan was plain. By creating a diversion across the river, he hoped to distract the attention of the Unionists long enough to enable his companions, coming from behind, to completely demoralize the blue clad ranks.

And, for a time, it appeared as if his ruse might succeed.

Then the Union forces rallied and, taking cover among the jagged rocks that lay at the base of Top O'Dawn Mountain, began to pour a withering fire into the initial wave of the Mounted Rifles.

JOHNNY KILLDEER, without a backward glance, kicked his horse in the ribs and started, at full gallop, down the narrow trail to the river. Behind him, unarmed, but grimly determined, rode Wade Buckner.

The Cherokee's piercing war-cry rang out as his horse's hooves clattered among the rocks and, pulling his

rifle from its boot, he began firing.

A blue clad figure sprang from behind a scrubby sumac and snapped a shot at Killdeer. Buckner, riding behind, caught the man around the shoulders and the pair of them piled into the rocky earth.

Moments later Wade caught the trailing reins of his roan and sprang aboard, his fighting power increased by the addition of a Union rifle and a goodly supply of powder.

Caught between two fires, the determined attack of the Cherokees from the front, and the cool, well-aimed shots from Killdeer and Buckner at their rear, the Unionists began the retreat. Before they were into the shelter of the forest, Watie's men began looting the supply wagons.

Buckner, his dark eyes alert, rode to the river's edge to watch. Killdeer, his horse breathing shallowly, its nostrils flecked with foam, stopped beside him. The Cherokee spoke no word, made no reference to Wade's downing the Union sniper, but his bronzed hand clamped tightly on Buckner's arm. In only that way did he express his gratitude.

Watie appeared, fording the river, his stallion's hooves throwing the water high into the sunlight. Behind the Indian chieftain rode Laughing Water, Elizabeth Evans. Some of the tightness was gone from her face, and her lips were relaxed. There was laughter in her eyes a. she looked at Buckner. Laughter, and a growing respect.

"You'll do to ride with," she told him. Watie nodded, but said nothing. He sat quietly on his horse, taking in the action before him. For all the nervousness he displayed there might not have been a Union soldier within the Territory Borders.

Buckner found it easy to believe the legend concerning Watie. It had been said that it was impossible to wound the man. In all the engagements in which he had taken part, he had yet to shed blood.

Stand Watie's men, their work done, applied the torch to the wrecked wagons and a cloud of black smoke ascended to the blue vault of heaven. Watie stood in his saddle and waved his arm, then forded the river toward Top O'Dawn Mountain. By twos and threes his Mounted Rifles disappeared into the concealment of the forest. Now and again from the still greenery, a short burst of rifle fire sounded, proof that the Unionists still fought back.

Behind Watie, led by a handful of his companions, the mules of the supply train had been impressed into duty as pack animals. Each bore upon his back part of the loot from the wagons. There were weapons, powder, food, enough for Watie's entire company. From it would come the strength they needed to carry the fight to the gray ranks ranged along the Kansas border.

AT WATIE'S temporary camp, the saddlebags of gold and Buckner's guns were both returned to him.

"You are a friend," Killdeer said soberly, "this we know now."

Wade Buckner hefted the heavy leather containers thoughtfully, then stepped to where Watie silently watched.

"Here," said Buckner. "Pay your men."

The Indian leader said nothing, but reaching forth his powerful hand, he lifted the heavy bags as if they were filled with thistle-down. "Why did you carry it so far, only to give it away?" Turning swiftly, Wade Buckner found Elizabeth Evans calmly watching.

"I don't know," Buckner returned slowly. "At the moment the Unionists shot my horse, it seemed that the most important thing in the world was to get the gold to safety. Now, I don't know."

She was silent for the space of a hundred heartbeats. Johnny Killdeer, his taciturn face as close to a grin as it would ever come, quietly walked away in the direction Watie had gone.

Sunlight splashed through the trees

and dust motes danced in the still air. Already there was movement among Watie's men. The Cherokee Rifles were moving on to another hunting ground. Horses reared as they were bridled, and weapons were gathered. Although confused, no movement went in vain, in the matter of minutes camp was broken and the last of the Indians rode into the hills.

"I know," Laughing Water said, and her face was lighted by a smile. "You have changed your sense of values."

"That's true," Wade said wonderingly, looking at the girl as if seeing her for the first time. "It's humans who are important; the gold never was."

Then the question that had been in the back of his mind for so many hours, came to the tip of his tongue. "Why do you live this life?" he asked Elizabeth Evans. "Surely, for a woman, there is some place of comfort."

She caught the reins of her gelding in her slim hand and her eyes were shadowed under the broad brim of her hat. "Comfort?" she asked. "What good is comfort when a soul is crushed? No, with these men I find all the comfort I need. We fight together and, when it's over, we all have the same sunrise for breakfast."

DIMLY, as though in a dream, Wade Buckner heard the quick rattle of her horse's hooves against the earth and Laughing Water was gone. He lifted a hand as though to stop her, as if by gesture he could arrest the movement of life around him. Then, dejectedly, he lowered his arm and turning, walked down toward the valley, leading his roan.

For so long had he stood, unmoved between the cause of right and wrong, he was powerless to move. And, after all, it was relative. The Confederacy was right. So were the Unionists. The difficulty lay in the fact that both sides fervently believed in that right. They were fighting, Wade concluded, against each other for the same thing.

Blood was spilled, lives were lost, souls ascended to the gold of the sky above, for what?

"Because," Wade Buckner said slowly, "they fight for something. What, I wonder, do I fight for?"

The answer was lost in the dimness of the past, or in the mistiness of the future.

BUCKNER made dry camp that night. The battle lines were too fluid to permit a fire to cook meat. He might be in the safety of the Confederate forces, and, just as easily, he might be a mile from a Union scouting party. Sympathetic with the cause of the south, Wade's private forays had been made against the Union Army, until they cursed him as a leech in their side and made every effort to squash him.

He wondered, Buckner did, if his personal war actually accomplished anything. Did he actually hate the Unionists? Or were his exploits merely to satisfy his own arrogance. Working under no flag, serving no patriotic cause, rather left the victory tasteless.

"*'Cio,* brother," a soft voice said looking up. Wade recognized Johnny Killdeer.

"*Cio,*" he returned in the Cherokee greeting and motioned for the Indian to sit down. The minutes sped away and neither spoke. Finally, Killdeer grunted. "You saved my life," he said.

Wade carefully formed his words into the stilted Cherokee. "You owe me nothing," he replied.

"Perhaps."

The moon looked out, bathing the dark pines with silver. In a little patch of light a rabbit hopped, pausing, his nose sampling the air, his forelegs held comically before him. Then he moved over the low surface of a boulder and vanished, his powder puff of a tail disappearing last.

"Even if I owe you nothing," Johnny Killdeer said, "I owe Laughing Water much."

"What of her?"

Killdeer got to his feet, abruptly,

silently. "She waits for you at the cave under Top O'Dawn," he replied. "I came to tell you what she said."

Wade Buckner grasped the reins of his roan, felt the animal's cold nose at his shoulder. Even the horse seemed to feel the intensity of his sudden emotion.

"What did she say?" Wade asked, afraid of the question and fearing the answer.

Johnny Killdeer was astride his horse, leaning over the dark mane. "Laughing Water said to come," he replied simply, "if you have found what you seek."

With the words he was gone.

The bracken of sumac and thorn- and wild-apple was familiar. The brilliant moonlight bathed the narrow trail with the radiance of day and the mouth of the cave was a deeper patch of darkness in the stygian gloom of the undergrowth.

Elizabeth Evans stood in a copse of trees, one hand on her horse's bridle. Her hat was thrown back and her dark hair hung in waves to her shoulders. Her face was oddly white and her soft lips parted as Buckner stood before her. "You did come," she said softly.

"Yes."

"You have found something to fight for?"

Wade stepped forward, dropping the reins he had held in his hand. Placing his palms on her shoulders he drew nearer. "You," he said savagely and lowered his face to hers.

Later, riding for Stand Watie's camp, Wade noticed that the sun tipped Top O'Dawn with gold. Slowly the mists in the valley rose until the trees were sodden with sunlight.

"Look," he called, reaching for the hand of the girl who rode beside him. "Here's the sunrise for our breakfast."

Her laughter, full and free, laden with love for him, was his only answer.

★

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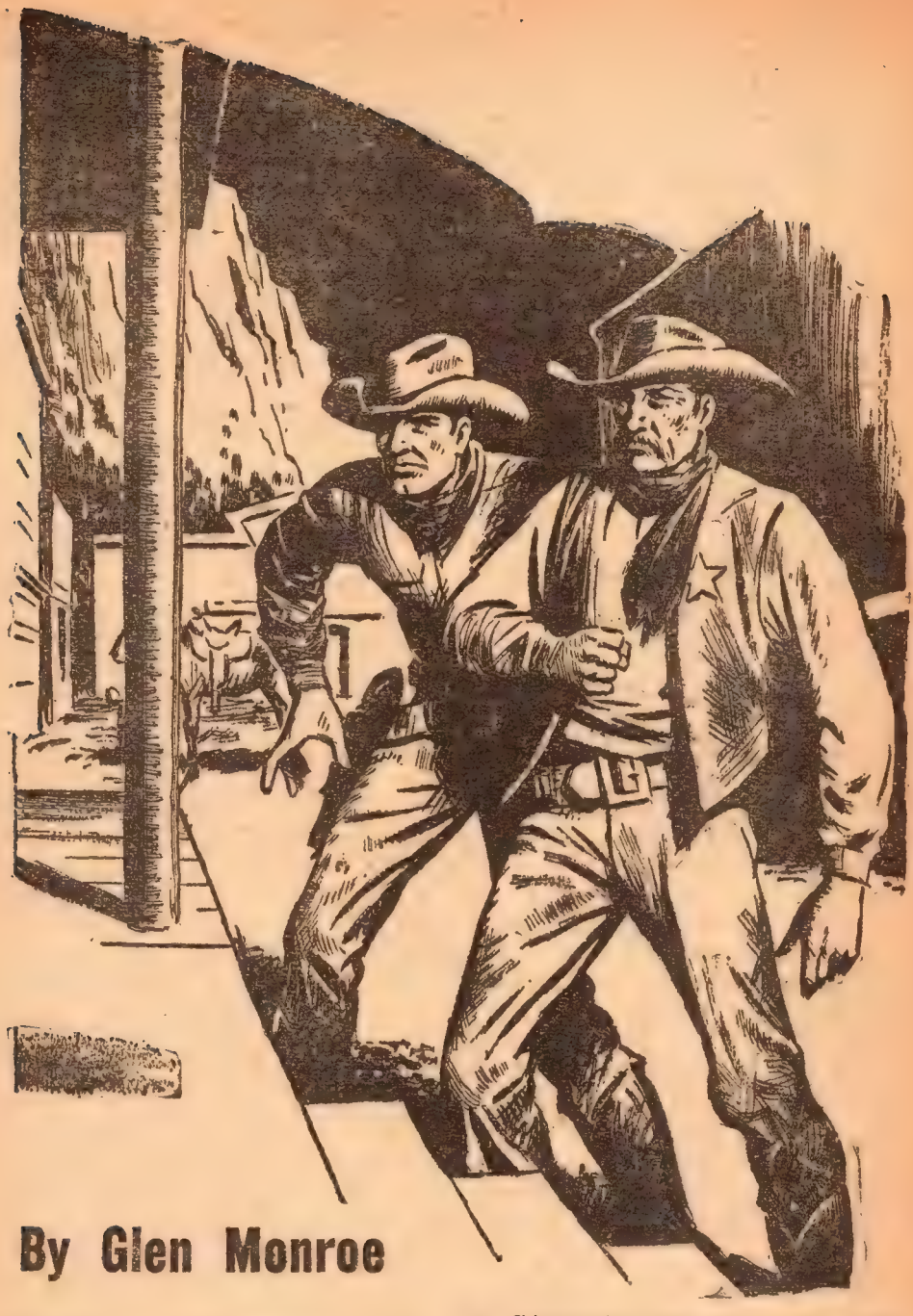

By Glen Monroe

Big John had more courage than sense, that was the trouble. He'd tangle with this Bill Archie, a cheap outlaw who'd just wait for a chance to plug Big John in the back—or some equally yellow deal.

I CAN GET more scared for somebody else than I can for myself at times; and that's how I felt when I saw Big John, our teamster from the Horsetrack Ranch, push back his chair in Soapy Smith's place, in Jimtown, and accuse Bill Archie—who's one of Bob Ford's friends—of dealin' from the bottom.

Bob Ford, I guess you all know, was the feller what shot Jesse James in the back, and later got himself bumped off in just as cowardly a play right there in Jimtown; all the toughs that train with Ford are of the same caliber. They've got a yellow streak as broad as a hair-cinch down their backs; but get one cornered where he's forced to fight and he'll strike like a rattlesnake in August.

The little tingles that was creepin' up my back don't stop me none from gettin' set for a fast draw, though, cause we Horsetrack riders stick to one another; and just because Big John and me are the only two from our outfit in the tough joint at the time don't spell nothin' to me. If Archie makes a pass for a gun I'll down him before the bouncers can get there to frame any false evidence about Bill shootin' in self-defense.

Archie is one of these slick murderers that would stab a man in the back or shoot from an ambush; but like all his kind, they'll never make a play for a gun until they've got the stage all set the way they want it. His small, shiftin' eyes blaze with rage when Big John leans over the poker table and talks straight, just as if he supposed a game could be on the level in Soapy's place.

"Don't think I didn't see you get that card off the bottom, Archie," Big John says, as calm as if he was askin' somebody to pass the gravy. "We'll just all draw down the chip we've got in the pot and have a new deal."

Archie glances around over the room, sees that none of his gang are right close, sizes up the way my right hand hangs by the thumb in my belt, and without a word, chucks the cards down, gets up like he's goin' to quit the game and goes to where one of Soapy's bouncers is sittin' and talkin' to a dancer.

I leans over to Big John and whispers in his ear: "Let's get out of here, John. That tarantuler will be back, pronto, all organized for war."

"Let him come," says John. "I'm out for a little fun tonight and I don't intend to have my moments of relaxation interfered with by no card thief. It's your deal, Kentuck."

I seen the bouncer that Archie is talkin' to look our way and nod. Pretty soon he motions to his partner and the two ease our way, Archie in the meantime movin' over next the wall near the faro layout. It's plain that he's got where he is thinkin' that I can't throw down on him because Big John is between us, but I can see something that Archie can't, so I let the play ride for the present.

The two bouncers stop, one on either side of Big John, who is skinning his cards down plumb careful like any experienced poker player will who sits into a game in Soapy's place. One of 'em sneers and growls: "I suppose you're makin' believe that hand is on the level."

It so happens that Kentuck has dealt Big John four kings, which does look suspicious. For a moment John's eyes showed that he was vexed, then he laid his cards down, and pushed back his chair, preparin' to get up and throw that fool bouncer out of the window.

Before I could even yell "Look out!" the other bouncer swings a blackjack for the top of John's head, the first one socks him on the jaw, and out of the corner of my eye I saw Bill Archie flash a gun.

The thing I'd seen that Archie hadn't was the main light-switch on the wall beside me. As I saw John sway forward under the blows of the bouncers, I pulled the switch, making the room plumb dark. A moment later I was grabbed up and dragged through the crowd and out the back door into the alley.

EXCEPT FOR the music stoppin' sudden, the occasional whimper of some panicky dance-girl, and the nervous rustle of feet as men sought the protection of tables and bar, you wouldn't have known there'd been a row. I was helpless to fight back, 'cause I was held so that I couldn't get my hand to my gun, but I thought

of Big John lying back there swelterin' in his own blood and I made up my mind to go get the rest of the Horsetrack riders, come back and clean Soapy's dive out right, in revenge for what they'd done to John.

When we got to the alley I was dropped to the ground, and in the dim light that came from a street light I saw Big John carryin' the bouncer that had hit him with the blackjack towards the waterin' trough at the back of the livery stable. A moment later he was givin' that bullnecked mug a cold bath, sousin' him in the trough, yankin' him out and shakin' him till the man's teeth chattered.

By that time I'd got my senses together enough to know that Big John hadn't been even stunned by them licks, but had gathered me under one arm and the bouncer under the other, and had walked unharmed out of the toughest dive Jimtown ever had.

I've been foreman of the Horsetrack outfit ever since Bob Wilson branded his first slick-eared calf with a half-circle above a W. Those brands, when they haired out, closed up the space between the outside prongs of the W and the ends of the half-circle, and made a mark that looked exactly like the track of a barefooted horse. You can do it yourself if you'll take a pencil, make a W and draw a half-circle above it connecting the points.

About a week after Big John's spectacular exit from Soapy's place, Wilson sent me over on the Lake Fork to look at some cattle he was thinkin' of buyin'. In the meantime, Bill Archie comes to the ranch and hires out to Wilson as a bronco-twister.

Of course, this couldn't have happened if I'd been at home. So when I come back and found this killer workin' under me, I didn't know just what to do, but finally decided to watch Archie close and fire him on the first crooked move he made.

Big John don't pay any attention to Archie a-tall, just goes on haulin' poles for a new corral with his big pet team of matched bay geldings that he talks to like they was men. John's love for them horses is a standin' joke among the Horsetrack riders.

Bill Archie is as spectacular as John is common. He wears a bright colored silk shirt like the ones some of them near-cowboys wear at the Ski Hi Stampede. He's thin and wiry, touchy as a bronc's ears and can't sit still more'n a minute at a time. He advertises that he's the best bronc-stomper that ever hit the San Luis and as we had needed a man on the rough string, Wilson had hired him to do the bustin'.

Hayin' had just begun and we had a full crew of ranch hands, so the only eatin' place that ain't occupied already is at the other end of the table from Big John and Bill is told he can sit there. So these two men, who ain't any more alike than a grizzly bear and a weasel, face each other every meal.

Anybody can see right from the start that Bill Archie's loud talk don't make any hit with Big John. Not that John says a word, he just goes on eating his meals or chatting with the two men on either side of him, while Bill is oratin' on the bad horses he's rode, the tough men he's killed and the hearts he's broke.

Cowboys can size up a four-flusher quicker than they can see a chance to dodge hard work, and it soon got so that when Bill would start one of his long-winded yarns, the boys would ask John some question about the work that he was doing. If John could be stirred up to talk, his voice would plumb drown out Bill, like when a bull roars you can't hear a calf bleat.

This made Bill sorer than anything else could have done, and the more he tried to make us see what a big man he was, the less attention anybody paid to him. There was one thing about Bill, though, he was unlike most braggarts in that he could pretty near do the things he said he could.

When it comes to sittin' a rollicky horse Bill was there all right, and he was fast with a gun, too. I've seen him flip his forty-five out of the holster and clip the head off a magpie as he was ridin' past the bird sittin' on a

fence post. He sure could put a bullet exactly where he wanted to.

At supper one evenin', when Bill had warmed himself up to tell about how he rode Dynamite at Cheyenne, Shorty Calhoun turned to John and asked him if it was so that he got knocked off a load of logs the day before.

"Haw, haw, haw!" roared John, "did you see that?"

"I wasn't quite sure," Shorty egged him on, pretending he hadn't seen just how the accident happened. "Something broke, didn't it?"

"Uh-huh," John explained. "I guess I bore down a little too heavy on that spruce sapling I used for a bindin' stick to twist my log chain with. Anyway, the wagon jarred over a rock and the rope that held the bindin' pole broke and that stick sprung up and cracked me on the head. Haw, haw, I just rolled off that load of logs and lay there on my back blinkin' up at the sun and trying to remember who I was. It was sure funny."

That was like John, he didn't kick about the hard luck he'd had in gettin' a lick on the head that would have killed an ordinary man. He just thought it was a good joke on himself.

SOMETHING about the way he took the matter and the way the fellers all laughed with John instead of at him seemed to stir up all the meanness in Bill Archie's disposition. He just couldn't stand it to have anybody in the limelight but himself. The way the conversation sounded was something like this:

"You see this Dynamite bronc has throwed all the busters from Monte Vista, Colorado, to Pendleton, Oregon," Bill spiels.

"I never did feel so foolish," John's voice overshadows Bill's braggin'.

Bill raises his voice a little more, "So I makes a bet of a hundred dollars I can ride him...."

"I just naturally doubles up and falls off like a woodchuck hit with a rock," roars John, completely drownin' Bill's story.

Everybody laughs with John and, though I can see Bill's mouth workin', I can't hear a sound he makes. But I can sure see the expression in his eyes, and I knew I was lookin' into the eyes of a man who hadn't forgot. His kind doesn't. From then on, the feelin' I had was like the one that you get when you see a fine big horse crossin' a lake on thin ice and can see the ice bend down under his weight, and you strain your ears listenin' for the first crack that will tell you it's all over with the horse.

Of course, seein' the certain outcome of the deal like I did, I should have fired Bill right now, but I didn't. Some way it just didn't seem possible that all that life and jolly strength of John's could be blotted out by a man like Bill. It's like when the sun shines warm and the flowers are noddin' at you friendly as you ride along among fat cattle, it's hard to realize that there'll ever be a day when the wind will whine around those cliffs and bring death and desolation across them peaceful scenes.

The boys didn't do anything intentional to stir up Bill's hatred, either, but to a man who wants to be IT like Bill does, every reference that was made to John's strength or his good nature, or the way you can't knock him out by a blow on the head, is like salt in a fresh cut to Bill. He's layin' up hatred the way one of these here misers hoards up pennies. He never overlooks the leastest one of these little imaginary injuries he thinks John hands him by just bein' natural.

One of Big John's habits is to whistle at his work. When he picks up his halters to go into the corral to catch Barney and Snip, these two big Clydes he drives, he begins to whistle, and all the horses in the corral just stand plumb at ease so long as they can hear John. He can just put his hands on any horse in the remuda, and even the nervous ones won't do anything more than just move out of his way.

The minute Bill slams the gate

shut, however, and walks into the pen with his loop ready to snare one of the colts he's breakin', every head is up and every eye peeled back to the white. When his rope sings out to fasten around the neck of a horse, they all jump and go millin' around, tryin' to find a hole they can crawl through. Of course, Bill sees the difference in the way the horses act, and that makes him sore, too. He considers it a personal insult to him to have it proved every morning that his skill with a lariat ain't essential in handling horses.

It seems like this thing bothers Bill more than anything else, and one morning he takes it out on John's pet by doublin' up his rope and whackin' Barney over the head with it as the work horse is standin' lookin' at John who is just comin' through the gate, whistlin' as usual.

I'd just come out of the saddle room and saw the whole deal. Hittin' a horse over the head is something we don't stand. It was the first excuse I'd had to fire Bill, and I made up my mind to do it right off, but my decision came too late.

I'd seen John take a harder lick than that himself when he was foolin' with one of the punchers and just laugh over it, but there wasn't any laugh on his face when he saw Bill hit Barney.

WHITE lines showed about his mouth and his face got hard. He took three long steps and caught Bill by the collar and the seat of the pants, lifted him above his head and tossed him out of the corral like he didn't weigh ten pounds. John never even looked to see where Bill lit, but put his arms around Barney's neck and began rubbing the place where Bill's rope had left a mark on the horse's neck and tellin' him not to mind.

The ground where Bill lit was covered with dry hay and corral cleanings, so that he wasn't hurt by the fall, that is, his body wasn't injured none. But all those little hate things he'd been storin' up just busted loose and made him crazy-mad. He ran back to the fence, not waitin' for the gate, and leaped up straddle of it, whipped out the gun he always wore, even when he was workin' in the corral, and shot twice, so fast that you couldn't hardly tell whether there had been more than one shot or not.

I was helpless to do a thing to stop it, and so were the boys that were just comin' to the corral to get their saddle horses. None of the riders except Bill ever puts on a gun until they are ready to start for the range.

John's back was towards Bill when the shots came, but his face was towards me. I saw the dust spurt out of John's old soft hat just above the woven hair hat-band one of the boys had made for him. A shiver went through his frame like goes through the body of a steer that's been beefed, and he sank to the ground, a vacant, unnatural look in his eyes.

Having seen one of Bill's bullets hit John in the head, I never gave him a second glance, but started for Bill the same as did the rest of the Horsetrack outfit, not a man even remembering that Bill was the only man that had a gun.

Bill slid off the fence, still holdin' his riata in his left hand and his gun in his right.

"Cut it out," he snarled. "Any of you hombres that wants what John got just come a step closer."

There wasn't any doubt but that he meant what he said, either, and for a man to attempt to resist Bill would have been the same as jumpin' off a cliff into Black Canyon.

"Line up there against that fence," Bill orders, his voice high and strident like that of an angry tom-cat.

For a man to even hesitate would be like suicide. There was nothin' else to do but obey, and I guess everybody else was thinkin' the same as I was that we'd be lookin' for this murderer's trail the minute he was free to make a break.

Bill kept us covered with a gun in his right hand while he shook out a loop with his left. The horses, scared

to death by the fracas, milled around past where John's big body lay in the center of the corral. When Prince Charming, the fastest horse in the whole remuda, came within reach of his rope Bill flipped it with as slick a one-hand throw as you ever saw and caught the horse.

It was clear that Bill had picked Prince for his getaway, knowing that he could outrun any of the others, and he figured that he'd get a good start while we were catchin' horses and gettin' organized for war.

He'd hold us here while he put on his saddle, which lay where he'd dragged it into the corral. Once up on Prince Charming, Bill would have more than an even break and a good chance to get out of the country without payin' for his crime.

I tried my best to see some way out of this deal. It seemed so silly for a whole bunch of men to be trapped like this, and to have to stand there and let a man just saddle up and run off, unharmed, after committing a cruel murder. But for the life of me I couldn't see any way to stop him, because to make a crooked move was certain to bring instant death.

THE certainty of Bill's aim had just been demonstrated to us, and of course now, he knew that if he made a single mistake and permitted any man on the Horsetrack ranch to get a gun, he'd pay for his crime. Desperate men don't fool with anybody who gets in their way.

Mad as we all were at Bill, there was no use in just deliberately gettin' killed. Nothin' we could do would bring Big John back.

As it happened, I stood near a fence post and I'd been workin' my hands around it with the idea that if I got a chance I'd pull myself up, jump the fence and make a run for the house where our guns were. In this way I was turned a bit sideways and could see all that Bill was doin' as he worked carefully to get all his preparations made during these few minutes that he had.

Barney, the horse that Bill had hit when he started this mess, had stalked over towards where Big John lay. Evidently he wondered what had happened to his friend. He sniffed at the body and then stood there so that he was between Bill and John.

When Bill was ready to make his getaway, he led Prince near enough to the gate so that the fastener was within reach and, still keeping us covered with the gun in his left hand, he laid his right hand on the horn of the saddle. He couldn't keep from braggin' even now.

"For any of you nitwits to follow me..." he threatened, then stopped like he couldn't finish what he was sayin'.

I managed to turn my head enough so that I could see the expression in Bill's eyes and it was the queerest look I ever did see. He appeared to be surprised, wondering and scared all in one fraction of a second. Then, as I was looking at him speculatin' as to what had happened, I saw his body jerked straight up in the air and disappear over his horse. Something had taken him clear over Prince's back.

We all whirled around in time to see Barney walk out of the way and Bill strugglin' in the grasp of Big John, who had come to from the shock of the bullet that had glanced on his heavy skull.

John had made Barney move over until he could reach over and grab Bill's hand as it rested on the saddlehorn, and he lifted Bill clear over Prince Charming.

We made a rush to help John, but he motioned us back. He was an awful-lookin' sight with the blood from a scalp wound streamin' down over his face, his long hair pulled down and matted with blood.

Naturally we expected John would take Bill's gun away from him and at least whack him cold with it, but he didn't.

He wrenched Bill's gun out of his hand and tossed it so high that it fell in the irrigation ditch back of the

house. Then with one jerk he ripped Bill's overalls off him and turned him over his knee, for all the world like a kid that had been caught stealin' apples, and spanked him. Yes, sir, spanked the toughest gun-slinger we'd had for years on the Upper Rio Grande.

He did a good job, too. Bill howled and bawled worse than a branded yearlin'. After he'd given Bill what he thought he deserved John set him on his feet.

"Don't you ever strike a horse over the head again," he roared, "or I may lose my temper and hurt you."

Can you beat that? It wasn't his own wound he had been thinkin' about, nor the attempted murder. It was Bill's havin' hit Barney over the head with a rope.

Bill pulled his tored-up pants together and stood there while John pulled out a handkerchief and wiped the blood off the place where one of Bill's bullets had cut.

This was the second time I'd seen Big John turn tragedy into a joke, and I made up my mind it would be the last, as far as Bill Archie was concerned.

"You've got ten minutes," I told Archie, "in which to roll your soogan and get ready to hit the trail. The boys will saddle up and be free to do as they please after that."

Bill didn't need that much time. Seven minutes later all that we ever saw of Bill Archie, gunman and friend of killers, was the dust his bronc was kickin' up as he headed south.

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THE SYMBOL OF COURAGE

by Wayne D. Mote

DO YOU know why men wore their hair long in the old West? It was not because there were no barber shops to be found, but because hostile Indians believed that any man—whether he be white or red—who cut his hair short did so as a cowardly means of discouraging anybody from taking his scalp. (It was hard to lift a short-haired scalp.)

Beginning as a matter of sportsmanship and defiance, long hair became the accepted symbol of the white man's courage, as well as the Indian. Long hair was the trademark of such famous Westerners as Wild Bill Hickok, Buffalo Bill Cody, and General George Custer.

Even after the Indian was tamed, Cody, who became a showman, continued to wear his hair long for ornamental purposes—and did so for the rest of his life.

OLD GRAMP DIAMOND sat in front of his telegraph-key, thinking that within twenty-three days, to be exact, he would be on the Great Western Railroad's pension list. Suddenly he shifted in his chair, wincing a little. A sudden pain had hit his bum leg; also, his assistant, clicking away at his practice key, had hit the wrong key, while trying to learn the Morse Code.

"You got the wrong key, Jack."

"Didn't even know you were listenin', Gramp; what key did I miss?"

Gramp told him.

The youthful assistant, who was practicing night and day so he could fill Gramp's job, tapped the word out again—and again he missed.

He got it right the third time and he grinned at Gramp. Jack was a good boy. A little dumb, but he was willing; he'd learn the Code in time—if he had enough time.

Gramp liked that healthy, good-natured grin. Not that he would admit it. He liked the young fellow, too, but could he ever make an operator out of him in time to retire?

Key To Death

When the holdup men came in for the gold shipment left in his care, Gramp could think of only one thing: "There goes my pension!"

By Dave Wilson

He shifted positions in his chair, easing his bum leg. He'd got it hurt years ago, during a hold-up; the railroad had, in return, given him this cowtown post, where he could take it easy. He kept listening to the key click, paying attention to it because of long habit.

He had a bum leg that hurt him; he had twenty-three days in which to run his job. He wanted those twenty-three days to pass without mishap. He wanted that pension; in fact, desperately needed it. Of course, he'd saved some of his wages, but not much.

On top of that, he had this young fellow—and the youngster was danged slow about learning the office routine and sending out on the key. Tonight, right after he'd got on shift, the superintendent of the mine had walked in, carrying a small but heavy sack, puffing a little as he walked, for he was fat and soft.

"What you got in that, Whitey?" Gramp had asked gruffly. "Your lunch?"

The superintendent had put the sack on the counter. "Lunch, hell; there's gold in this sack, Gramp—the richest ever taken out of our placer mines. We want you to be sure it gets into Helena on the night train, huh?"

Gramp had had his assistant put the gold in the safe; he'd given the superintendent his receipt. The gold, then, was his responsibility, and the responsibility of the railroad.

"Dang, Whitey, I was hopin' I'd be retired before you shipped gold again. Me, I don't cotton to the junk around the office. You ride in openly with your guards, tellin' the whole country you carry dust, and then you

and your guards pull out, leavin' the dust with me."

"The railroad's job is to ship our dust out; they guarantee us safe transportation to Helena."

"But what if somebody took the dust away from me?" Gramp had said angrily. "The railroad would can me pronto. I know danged well they're watching me now, lookin' to see if they ain't some way they can get shut of me; they'd like to save payin' me that pension."

"We've shipped dust all right before."

Gramp watched his assistant twirl the dial of the safe, the gold inside. "There's a first time for eveythin'."

HIS ASSISTANT had remained silent, figuring evidently it was no quarrel of his; that had been two hours ago. Inside of fifty minutes the Limited would come through, make its brief stop for water, and the gold would go on board. Gramp wished those fifty minutes were up and the gold was on the train. "You missed again, Jack," he said suddenly.

The assistant studied him. "Man, whenever you hear a click, it means something to you," he marvelled. "I wish I had your ear for code."

"You'll get it, Jack." Under his breath he added, *"Eventually...maybe."*

A young woman, about twenty-two, came into the depot, the wind blowing the door shut behind her. She was, Gramp decided, as pretty as a calendar painting. She said, "Hello, Gramp."

"Howdy, Cynthia."

"How goes things, Gramp?" She put her arm around him and kissed his forehead. "Now don't tell me again that I remind you of the daughter you never had."

"You're purtier," Gramp said. For the first time since coming on trick he smiled. "I don't see why you married a man as homely as Jack. Why didn't you marry me? I'm goin' get a pension in a few days."

"Yes," she finished, "and we could putter around your garden, go fishing catfish in the river." She was serious now. "How is Jack getting along?"

"He might do."

"He'd better *do;* I don't want to be a common cowpoke's wife. I want a home and some kids, here in town, with a husband getting good wages."

Jack got to his feet. He was tall and his long face showed his good-nature. "She's got it all mapped out for me, Gramp. Chuck ready, honey?"

"On the table?"

Gramp glanced at the big clock on the wall. "Be back in fifteen minutes, Jack. That'll give me time to get a bite from the restaurant before the Limited comes in."

"I'll send you over something, Gramp," Cynthia said.

He shook his gray head vigorously. "I've et too much of your kids' chuck; thanks heaps just the same, girl."

The pair went out into the wind. Gramp found himself thinking he was too rough on Jack. But that was the way they'd trained *him*—treated him rough and made him work. He wondered if he had been as slow at learning the key as Jack was. But when a man tried to think fifty years back his memory becomes blurred.

His key started to click. He listened to it idly, noting that the Limited was ten minutes late in Malta, forty miles to the west; it had been five minutes late out of Havre, the division point. That was bad luck. He wished the gold were on it— He wished—

"Hello, Gramp."

The harshness of the strange voice jerked Gramp Diamond out of his reverie. Two strangers stood in the doorway. His first thought was, *"How did strangers know my name?"* and his second thought was, *"What do they want?"*

"Somethin' I kin do for you men?"

The tall one—a slender, leather-faced man—pushed into the office,

going through the breast-high swinging door that separated the office from the waiting-room. The other, a shorter man, stood beside the outside door, leaving against the ticket-opening. The tall man, Gramp saw, had pulled his Colt; the other, he also noticed, had a gun in hand now.

"Sure," the tall man said agreeably. "You can give us that gold the mine superintendent brought in a while back."

Gramp Diamond had never been held up before; therefore he'd never looked into the round cold bore of a .45 held in a hard, rock-like fist. He remembered, afterwards, he had had a number of sudden thoughts. Chief of these was, *"There goes the pension."*

He tried to keep his voice calm. "What gold?"

The tall man spoke harshly. "We been layin' back in the hills for a month watchin' that mine. An' this afternoon the super rides in with his cavalry along. We knew then the gold was goin' in; it was a dead give-away."

"He's a damn' idiot," Gramp stated angrily.

"He may be an idiot," the man said, "but you'll be a dead idiot if you don't open that safe pronto!"

The man by the ticket window spoke. "Get to work, ol' man."

GRAMP allowed himself a moment of decision. He glanced up at the clock, noting that Jack would be back in three minutes; the kid was very punctual, too. He leaned back in his chair, heavy pencil in hand, unconsciously tapping the hard end on the smooth desk.

"Move!" the tall man said.

Gramp leaned forward, chair squeaking. He had a rifle in the corner but to get to it—to reach for it—That would be suicide. He mentally bade goodbye to his pension; he could see himself cleaning out stalls for a few cents down at the town livery-barn.

But he had no other choice.

Outside, above the singing of the wind, he heard boots on the loading platform. Maybe Sheriff Wilson had seen the two enter and become suspicious— But that, he knew, was a wild dream, no more; Sheriff Wilson was probably down at the *Mint* in his evening pinochile game.

"Who's comin'?" The man at the window spoke.

Gramp knew the boot-sounds now. "That's my assistant," he said. "For my sake, don't harm him; he's got a wife and a baby."

The tall man shot a quick glance at his companion. He rapped out his words swiftly. "We'll deal with you, Gramp; we won't harm you or the kid if you promise to open that safe without trouble."

Gramp remembered Cynthia's pretty face. "All right," he agreed.

The tall man spoke again. "Nels, holster your gun. Me, I'll take this chair. Gramp, introduce us as friends; talk to the kid just long enough to kill any suspicions he has, if he has any. Then send him out on some errand, huh?"

"Otherwise, we'll kill you both," the short man stated.

Gramp had a sudden plan—a wild, hurried plan. "All right," he said.

No guns were in sight when Jack came in. Nels leaned against the counter, apparently studying a time-table. The tall man was talking with Gramp about railroading. Jack scowled a little, seeing the tall man behind the counter; railroad rules claimed nobody but employees could go behind the counter.

"Jack," Gramp said, "I want you to meet Joe Grant here." The tall man shook hands with Jack. "Grant used to run a key up west of here but he quit railroadin' to take up cow-raisin'."

"Here's Nels Jones, my foreman," the tall man said, designating the man leaning against the counter.

Nels returned Jack's greeting with a short nod. Jack took his seat at his

key after giving Gramp a small package. "Cynthia sent you over some sandwiches. She didn't have anything to put coffee in, or I'd have taken you some coffee over, Gramp."

"I'm obliged to her," Gramp said. He did not open the sandwiches. He sat there, drumming with his pencil. Jack stretched his legs out and leaned back in his chair. The tall man had switched the talk to cattle. Gramp nodded now and then, glancing up at the clock; Jack had his eyes closed, apparently sleeping.

Gramp let four minutes pass, then he unwrapped the sandwiches. "Jack, run down to the restaurant and get me some coffee, huh?"

Jack got to his feet. He was a little pale, Gramp noticed. "Golly, I got a sudden belly-ache; Cynthia must've had something in that bunch of spuds that didn't agree with me. Yeah, I'll go, Gramp. The night air will do me good."

"I'll pay you when I get the coffee," Gramp assured. "Take your time, kid."

Jack said goodby to the tall man and Nels, saying he was glad to meet them. He went outside.

SUDDENLY the tall man was all business. "Now get that safe open, Old Man, and make it fast."

"No need to pull your guns again," Gramp Diamond grumbled; "I've seen them before." He got slowly down on his knees.

He turned the dial, deliberately getting the combination off one point, and then tugged at the handle. The door, of course, wouldn't budge. He tried again; still the door held closed.

The tall man was down beside him, gun against his ribs. "Get it right this time." He said it very quietly.

Gramp had sweat on his forehead. He didn't rub it off, though; he had stalled for time, and gained some. This time, fingers trembling, he opened the safe. He got slowly to his feet. By that time the tall man had the gold and had slammed the door shut again.

He gave the bag to Nels, who went outside. Then he took Gramp's rifle with him. He clicked the lock on the door and said, "Sleep tight, old timer," and went out.

Gramp heard their boots run across the loading platform. Evidently they had their broncs across the track behind empty boxcars. The tall man had taken the ring of keys off the desk when he had taken Gramp's rifle; Gramp was locked in. He had another key somewhere in the rubble in his desk and searched for it feverishly. He had just found it when he heard the roar of guns.

They made a flat, ugly sound. It beat against the moonlit night and then the wind swept it away. He heard men hollering. The sound had come from the boxcars across the track.

Gramp said softly, "Cynthia, all we can do is hope."

He had unlocked the door and was sitting in his chair when Sheriff Wilson and Jack came in. A quick glance told Gramp that Jack was okay. Wilson, a short, rotund man, was beaming, and he carried the gold sack. "We got 'em, Gramp; Jack got one, I got t'other. The short gent got killed, but Jack jus' wounded the tall one. They're takin' him to the clink now." He slapped the gold on the desk. "Better get this on the Limited pronto."

Jack sat down, face pale.

Gramp grumbled, "I didn't think the kid would catch on, him new on the key that-away. Maybe he's got more'n I credit him with." He winked at Wilson.

Wilson asked, puzzled, "How did Jack find out they aimed to rob you? He never got time to tell me that."

Gramp was playing with his heavy pencil. He turned the metal butt down and tapped on the desk. The sound was clear and regular.

"I read his Morse code," Jack said, rather proudly.

Madame Chiquita was still a very handsome woman.

WHERE THERE'S A WILL

By D. D. Sharp

FOXY NOLAN wore his nickname proudly; he was no fool, he frequently boasted. He could name a dozen men who were drying up in their coffins, there on boothill above the cowtown, when they might still be alive if they hadn't been so dumb.

Foxy Nolan had it all figured; Madam Chiquita had been playing around with any man in the district who took her fancy. So, when they found the fortune-teller knifed, they'd suspect a jealous woman, of course. But Madam Chiquita had apparently read her own fortune, because . . .

Then there was Al Miller, the big bum, who was sweet on Madam Chiquita, the palmist. Al was big and mean but he was awful dumb; he was in Santa Fe doing time for shooting a man down where everybody could see him, while Foxy had a couple of notches on his gun and had done no time at all. He could trail off, wild, high, and handsome whereever he chose.

Which he was doing in a long gallop toward Big Sandy to gamble with the cow-punchers who were gathering there to see high-wire performers and ferocious animals that were unknown to the open grasslands or the pinon and juniper timber of the wooly west.

The tigers and lions, shown with open jaws on the hand-bills, interested Foxy not one bit. There were wild critters in the nearby mountains he had never gone out of his way to see. What took his eye were beautiful ladies in tights, who flipped so daintily from swinging bars away up in the tent-top. Foxy was a ladies' man; that is to say, he liked the girls.

So he rode into town, his bronco pony frothing and sweating. The jaded mustang halted from long habit in front of the *Gold Coin* saloon. Foxy stepped stiffly out of the saddle, hitched up his sagging pants, then knotted the reins together and tossed them over a hitching-post. He stepped upon the boardwalk, and was about to push the green-slatted swinging doors of the thirst-haven, when a small Mexican boy darted up and pushed a dodger into his reluctant grasp. He was about to toss it away with an indignant oath when his glance fell upon two words that raised delightful memories. He read slowly spelling out the words with moving lips:

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Tent near the circus grounds. She reads past, present, and future. She predicted the Jamestown flood And the death of President Garfield.

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Foxy's soul warmed within him. Madam he had known with much profit to himself; he would still be barking for her had not Al kicked him out for an act of indiscretion.

Madam was a handsome woman of about thirty-five. She had been married to four men—each of whom, in fairly rapid succession had been disqualified by the hot lead of the said Al Miller now doing time in Santa Fe. The first, second, and third killings the law had excused as self-defense; but the fourth husband had no gun, and Al paid for his oversight with a term of ten years—most of which he had already served. He was going to be released in another six months. Foxy had it figured out to a day when Al should be released and had promised himself another and remote location before the evil day arrived. In the meantime, he had another objective; Madam was prospering. He'd heard she carried a roll in her stocking that was big enough to choke a mule. He pushed the dodger into a pants pocket, then shouldered open the swinging doors, winked at the pale, egg-faced bartender, then leaned against the polished mahogany to wait a whiskey straight which that wink had always commanded.

When Egg Face set out bottle and glass, he poured a stiff drink, spun a silver dollar upon the bar, and walked out leaving Egg Face to pocket the change.

THE BOARD sidewalks were crowded with slow-talking men, mostly cowmen, tall in stitched boots and loud with ringing spurs. Foxy looked up and down the street for Madam's shiekish booth and the big, lined palm in front. Circus tents were being raised two blocks away at the end of town in a grassy bay that was

shelted from an ocean of prairie by jetties of barbed fence and a mud wall that enclosed the wagon yard. A gaily-ornamented wagon-cage rolled past the circus grounds disclosing Madam's tent, the big, lined palm, and large black letters below it, boasting her talents.

Foxy lowered his right hand to the gun handle that rode out from his right hip. He slid the gun up from its holster then down snugly again, making sure of a smooth draw in case of necessity. It might possibly be that Madam had learned to shoot somewhat better during the three years since he had barked for her. Satisfied as to the immediate availability of the old dependable life-saver, he crossed the dusty road, walked around the weathered adobe warehouse of the Big Sandy Mercantile Company to take the Madam's tent from a side angle, and thereby with surprise.

No one noticed him as he strode down the back alley with the stalking gait that goes with high heeled boots. Slowly he pulled aside the tent flap until he could peep inside. Madam was seated behind a small table on which was a Bible, a crystal ball, and a deck of dog-eared cards which were spread fanwise and face up. As he watched, she added three more cards and her lips moved silently as though she was talking to herself. Madam was telling her own fortune, for there was no one in the client's chair opposite the little table.

Foxy waited as she counted up three more cards. She was wholly absorbed in divination of what was to come to pass. Nolan, one hand on the butt of his gun, barged in.

Madam lifted her cagy blue eyes, searched his face, then laid down the cards still in her hand. "Get out of here!" she yelled, "I don't want no truck with an old bottle like you!"

Foxy pulled the tent flap tight behind him then slid into the client's chair. His breath was tight and quick. "I come to guard you, Nell," he said hoarsely; "you ain't safe traipsing around alone."

"What you trying to do, Foxy—skeer me? Well, I ain't skeered of no man alive or in hell. Now let that soak in. And I ain't looking for no man; let that soak in, too. Now get!"

"Not that easy," Nolan growled. his wary glance shifting from Madam's turquoise-loaded finger to a shadow, tall and lanky passing across the tent flap. "I know why you badgered Al into bouncing me, Nell, and I don't like it. Now just sit quiet." He held up a tintype of a curly-headed man. "Guess you can see it's Al, and he's wanted in Texas for sheriff-killing. Any funny moves and I turn it over to Sheriff Banks and let him find out what he'll find out."

"You're faking," sneered Madam. "Foxy Nolan, you always was just a dirty fake."

"So you want I should spill what I know?"

Madam's eyes fell. "What do you want, you squealer, and don't make it too stiff.

"Five hundred cartwheels," specified Nolan.

"I ain't got no five hundred; I'm near broke, and I don't lie, Nolan. I hates a liar."

"Maybe I'll just take a look in your stocking-leg." He rose slowly, cautiously, looking back at the tent flap. "No racket now or I'll spill everything for sure."

"You better think a minit about Al, Foxy; he'll slide a knife into your belly if you lay a hand on me."

Foxy thought that one over. Al could handle a knife like a professional thrower, but Al was safe behind bars at Santa Fe. He'd have a fat chance of following a trail six months cold. "I said dig up!" he bawled and wiggled the gun against the softness of Madam's stomach. "Dig up or I'll take it myself."

"I'll get it," she suddenly agreed.

"Turn your head the other way; please, don't mortify me, Nolan."

He curled a lip but turned his back to her, sure of himself, sure of his ability to handle an unarmed woman. And besides, he could see her in the crystal ball below him on the table. *She's a beaut,* he thought, as he watched her draw her skirt and petticoats, revealing a shapely leg in black lisle stocking from which she drew something obscured by the curve of the glass.

She handed him a roll of bills. "That's all, Nolan; It don't leave me anything."

He stuffed the money into his pants pocket. "You'll get plenty more when you open your tent flap and begin to fleece the suckers," he assured as he slipped out of the tent. A moment he stood, spur-deep in dust new stirred by circus crowds; then he hurried across the traffic, halting covered wagons, buckboards aflutter with organdy and giggling girls, and ribald cowpunchers chousing their bronchos around and around—some with a bottle of red-eye held high in one hand as though it were some brave banner for which they gave their all.

Foxy Nolan ignored the crowd. His one interest was to reach the *Gold Coin* with the least possible delay. When he reached it, he treated the house and took a couple of deep ones for himself. He lingered over the last one, one booted heel kicking the brass rail because he liked the ring of his spurs against it and didn't care who it annoyed.

AFTER THAT night the circus left town. It's six wagons plodded slowly toward Red Lake, whose gleaming window-panes could be seen from Big Sandy itself when the sunset fell upon them. Foxy watched it go, each wagon drawn by four big horses, plumes of red and green flying above the gaily ornamented cages. And behind them Madam in her buckboard, her tent neatly folded and stored behind the seat. He blew her a drunken kiss and went back into the saloon. In one night his money was gone. Whiskey and a card sharper from the circus cleaned him and that *pronto.* His coveteous thoughts were on the fortune-teller; he did not believe she had given him all the money in her stocking. Red Lake was but fifteen miles away; not more than three hours ride for a man horseback.

Twilight was gathering the prairie into its melancholy shadows when Nolan rode into Red Lake and found his way to the brass Rail of the *Big Horn* saloon. The crowd, the dust, the fluttering girls in white swiss and organdy were almost a duplication of circus night at Big Sandy. Madam's tent, too, fluttered in the dying gasp of a southwest wind and the big hand with its red lines swung gently from the eye bolts that secured it to a round iron rod.

Nolan rode boldly to the open tent flap and leaned low on his horse to peer inside. He had no fear of the woman now that she knew he had the evidence to send Al away from her forever, or at least a long, long term of years. He swung to the ground, dropped the knotted reins over a circus tent stake and made his entry as though he owned the place. Inside the tent he set himself possessively in the clients chair. The tent was empty but Madam soon came hurrying through a rear opening.

"You—you snake!" she stormed, "Crawling where you ain't wanted. I give you all I got. Can't you let me alone?"

Nolan's eyes opened a trifle. He'd never seen Madam knuckle. In a minute she'd be crying. He smiled and said nothing.

"Please, Foxy," she begged, "let me alone. I'll keep my mouth shut if you'll just leave me alone." Her tone hardened. "If you don't I'll have you pulled for robbery, so help me I will."

He smiled and said nothing, knowing it was breaking her down.

[*Turn To Page* 90]

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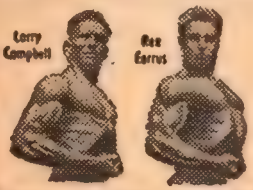

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"You'd better lay off, I tell you." She began to shake a little—not much, just a quiver at her throat and a bouncing of her toe where it rode off the floor.

"I won't give you another cent!" Her voice rose, but Foxy's menacing gun softened it down again. "You think you are smart," she said more coldly. "Foxy, you call yourself. You may be slick, Nolan, but you ain't smart; if you was you'd know better than to keep hounding me. I'll get you yet! I'll trap you like the skunk you are and then Al will finish you off."

Nolan's smile became a little less certain; he knew Madam Chiquita pretty well, and he knew she wasn't bluffing. If she really was going to try to outsmart him, he'd show her pretty quick that no woman could do that.

"Fork it over," he demanded unable to keep silent longer. "If you monkey with me, I'll do like I told you."

"It's over there, every dollar I have. It's the truth!" She thrust one hand forward, moved a family-size Bible to reveal a small stack of yellow gold-backs neatly weighted with silver dollars. "I knew you'd come back, Foxy, so I fixed everything ready for you; Al's going to shoot you down like a dog."

"Al's behind bars," Nolan's tone was elated. He swept the money into both fists.

"Al's out, Foxy; that's what you didn't know. He's joining the circus tomorrow. Got six months off for good behavior."

Nolan laughed derisively, "What a bluff, Nellie! 'Magine it? Al on good behavior. Al saying 'Yes sir, yes sir, and can I have a hymn book?' That's rich! Rich!" He crammed the wadded bills and the clinking silver into both pants pockets.

"So you're going to tell Al?" he asked sullenly and stared down upon her as he rose.

Her eyes widened as she stared back at him. "You got it!" she cried, "Now get!"

"Al can't know a thing," his narrowing eyes fixed her frightened ones. "In the pen he can't, but when he comes out you are going to tell him. Then I got to hide out long as he lives. If I got any sense I'll shut your mouth." He palmed a stiletto from a sheath hidden inside his belt. It was a blade he might have lifted from a lovesick and jealous Mexican girl, a slender, well tempered blade of death. A steel to incriminate a woman instead of himself.

"No!" Madam begged. "Don't kill me, Nolan; you know I'd never squeal on you. Please! Please!" Her scream was stifled as Foxy plunged the deadly steel into her heart.

Nolan stared at her, a small huddle of blue silk and white arms on the canvas floor. He left the stiletto in her breast. Madam had mixed in many love quarrels with her fortune-telling; any jealous senorita might have used that blade. He thumbed his nose of the dead woman, then slid through the tent flap, pulling it tightly closed behind him.

HE WAS at the Big Horn when Sheriff Banks pushed open the swinging doors and stood looking around the room. "Seen old man Willows?" he asked.

"Willows?" the barkeeper's voice was startled.

"Bill Hankins just found the fortune-teller dead; a woman's knife was in her. Got to get Willows to dig a grave for her. Hot as it is we oughter get her buried *pronto!*"

Foxy eyed the whiskey bottle, almost half-empty now.

"Who done it?" asked the bartender.

"This ain't no time for a lawman to go shooting off his mouth," Banks said evasively as he left the saloon.

Foxy put in the rest of the afternoon at the *Big Horn*. He was afraid to leave town for fear of arousing suspicion.

[*Turn To Page* 92]

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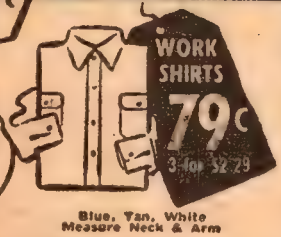

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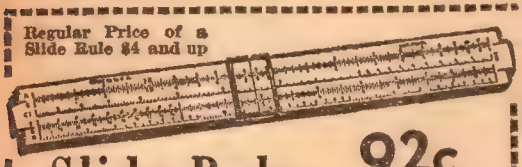

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He was very drunk indeed when Al left the early morning stage. Foxy's first impulse was to shoot quick and risk hanging rather than Al's aim. He would have drawn his gun but Al's alert gray eyes were on him, and his hazy, drunken brain got it over that Al couldn't know a thing. Madam's lips were sealed forever. So he mustered a friendly greeting.

"Howdy, Al!" he shouted. "Glad to see you, feller."

Al walked in long strides toward Madam's empty tent.

"Where you going?" demanded an old man who was watching, "Don't you know Madam Little One's been murdered. Willows is digging her grave already and Sheriff Banks wants nobody about her tent until he finds who done it."

Al froze where he stood; his jaws tightened and his gray eyes sought the big lined hand and then the shiekish tent. He said not a word of question or comment and when he had taken his look he turned and walked to the court house where Sheriff Banks had his office.

Foxy was all set to risk leaving town, when Sheriff Banks asked him to be one of the pall-bearers. He had to accept; he was supposed to be a close friend of the Madam's.

Al passed him several times that day. He was glum, but made no funny moves and showed no suspicion, so Foxy relaxed. If Al knew anything, it was like him to shoot the first meeting. Foxy sat on the edge of the sidewalk and thrust a hand among the rumpled gold-backs and the hard money in his pocket and felt himself in luck. It was sweet to sniff the dry red dust of the road when a carriage passed and to feel the warm hot burn of the sun on his back. He would take the road tomorrow. Everything was going to be okay, he silently reassured himself.

THE NEXT day folks gathered at the court-house because the

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sheriff said Madam Chiquita had left her will to be read. That was funny, folks said, like she might, after all, know what was to happen, like she advertised. Why else had she left her will there when she would have travelled along with the circus if she hadn't been killed.

Foxy decided it was a good time to pull out, everybody being at the court-house. He was sure he wouldn't be followed; no one remotely suspected him. Sheriff Banks was looking for a girl.

That was why he was so surprised when Al came hell-a-beating-tanbark out of a fog of dust and cut down on him until he slid lifeless from the saddle.

Red Lake folks figured Madam Chiquita outsmarted Foxy, even if she was a woman, and a dead one at that. She left a will when she knew Foxy had followed her to Red Lake. Willed all she owned to Foxy for his lifetime only; what was left when Foxy died was to go to Al. Madam knew that Al would never let Foxy live to keep her money.

Al was tried and came off clear, for he proved that Foxy had killed Madam Chiquita and was a fugitive from the law. Among the silver dollars Foxy had spent at the *Big Horn* saloon, Al found one with the date of his birth and on it was carved in engravers' script; *"From Al To Nellie."* Al had the warden send it to her before he left prison. Foxy had floundered into a double set of traps and both laid by a woman. If he'd been half as smart as he thought himself he'd at least have taken a close look at the stolen money he was spending.

★

(*Continued From Page 8*)

released four men; the other being a squaw, we brought her home; great as was my hatred for these enemies, I could not kill so small a party. During the close of the ninth moon, I led a large party against the Chippewas, Kaskaskias, and Osages. It was a long campaign and I killed thirteen of their bravest warriors with my own hands.

Our enemies having now been driven from our hunting grounds with so great a loss as they sustained, we returned in peace to our villages. After burying the dead and mourning for them, we started preparations for our winter hunt. It was very successful.

WE HAD OTHER THINGS to do to keep us busy. Our women planted the corn; when they had finished doing this we made a great feast and danced the Crane Dance. The women joined us in this dance, all dressed up with feathers. At this feast our young braves select the young woman they wish to have for a wife.

The Crane Dance often lasts two or three days. When this is over we feast again and have our national dance. The large square in the village is swept and prepared for this purpose; the chiefs and old warriors take seats on mats which have been spread at the upper end of the square. The drummers and singers come next and the braves and women form the sides, leaving a large space in the middle.

The drums beat and the singers commence. A warrior enters the square keeping time with the music. He shows the manner he started on a war party, how he approached the enemy; he strikes and describes the way he killed him. All join in the applause. He then leaves the square and another enters and takes his place. Such of our young men as have not been out in war parties and killed an enemy stand back, ashamed; they are not able to enter the square. I remember that I was ashamed to look

[*Turn Page*]

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where our young women stood, before I could take my stand in the square as a warrior. What a pleasure it is to an old warrior to see his son come forward and relate his exploits; it makes the father feel young again and induces him to enter the square, and "fight his battles over again."

When our national dance is over, our cornfields hoed, and every weed dug up, our young men are anxious to start out. The direction in which they wish to travel is sundown, to hunt deer and buffalo. Also to kill any Sioux if we find them on our hunting grounds.

The old men and the women go to the lead mines to make lead; the remainder of our people start to fish and get the materials needed to make mats. Everyone leaves the village and remains away for about forty days; then we all return. The hunting party brings in dried buffalo and deer meat; if we find those Sioux on our hunting grounds, then we also bring back some Sioux scalps.

The party from the lead mines bring lead, and the others bring dried fish and mats for our winter lodges. Presents are now made by each party; the first, giving to the others dried buffalo and deer; they, in exchange presenting the others with lead, dried fish, and mats. This is a happy season of the year. Having plenty of provisions—such as beans, squashes, and other produce, with our dried meat and fish—we continue to make feasts. We do this until our corn is ripe. Some lodge in a village makes a feast daily to the Great Spirit.

When our corn is getting ripe, our young people watch with anxiety for the signal to pull roasting ears, as none dare touch them until the proper time. When the corn is fit to use, another great ceremony takes place. There is much feasting and we give thanks to the Great Spirit for giving us corn.

To you, my white brother, I have told in my words, how I live and what

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WESTERN PRE-FABS

SAN FRANCISCO was the goal of many of those who went to California to find a fortune in gold. Colonel Fremont had just purchased a ranch in 1846 from Alvardo, former governor of the Territory, and the property had been considered worthless. And now came the story of the find of gold on it. But at the given moment there was something just as precious as gold—houses! All the people flocking to this land of opportunity had to be sheltered. One enterprising man shipped lumber from New York City worth $1,000; he sold it for $14,000. For, with lumber, you could build those houses and the profit was tremendous.

But one enterprising soul was a century ahead of his time. At least seventy-five houses were imported from Canton. They were knocked down in the Orient, loaded aboard boats, then brought to San Francisco and put up by Chinese carpenters. Who says that pre-fabs are something new?

A WESTERN RACKET

SALLY, and her sister Mary, hated all people who were coming out to the West to look for the precious metal. Sally called all the people from the east "emigrants." Sally and Mary first lived on Bear Creek, then moved to the banks of the Cosumne. They made a fair living by selling meals to the "emigrants." But it was those blasted fools from the East who had ruined a nice little racket the two dames worked on the Indians.

"Afore these here emigrants come," said Sally, "the Injuns were as well-behaved and bidable as could be; I liked 'em more'n the whites. When we begun to find gold on the Yuber, we could git 'em to work for us day in and day out, fur next to nothin'. We told 'em the gold was stuff to whitewash houses with and gave 'em a handkecher for a tin cup full. But after the emigrants begun to come along and put all sorts of notions into their heads, there was no gettin' them to do nothin'."

ANOTHER WAY TO GO WEST

SOMEHOW, western fiction has centered upon the pioneer who used the covered wagon to get from the east to California; and we all know it was possible to make that terrible long journey around the Cape by boat. But there actually was a very simple way to get from New York to California, without climbing mountains, fighting "Injuns", or going through the heavy seas for a long period of time. Bayard Taylor tried it and it really was a cinch.

The good boat *Falcon* took him to the Isthmus. Chagres was a collection of cane huts. True there was a *Crescent City Hotel* but it merely was a hut with a floor to it. Bayard met a returning Californian with a box containing $22,000 in gold dust and a four-pound lump in his other hand.

At Chagres, Bayard hired a boat and their goal was Gorgona. Half the fare was paid in advance—the balance when and if they survived, plus a bonus for a little speed. Then by mustang to the Pacific coast. This journey across the Isthmus took five days, and at least there was *Hotel Americano* for the weary traveller. The two dangers were bad cooking and *"mucha colera"*.

Then Bayard took the steamer Oregon and he was on his way to California. Of course, there was a mob waiting for the boat; tickets were being sold at double price—$600. And then onward to the land of Gold. What kept the passengers on the boat occupied was fighting for space in the dining room and there were two sessions. Exciting trips? No Injuns—no fightin'—no mountains—nuttin' to do!